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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this exploratory study was to identify a range of conflicts that had occurred between several parents and the schools their children attended. The parents of 12 families were interviewed in depth about unresolved conflict situations that involved their children. In 10 cases the child had been moved to another school as a consequence of the dispute. Very few children in the conflict situation had been involved in any meetings or discussions to seek a resolution to the problem. Several key emotional components were studied, including: (1) the child's emotional upset; (2) parent's fear for their child's emotional and educational well-being; (3) a general intensity of feeling about the progression of events; (4) concern about the perceived attitudes of school personnel; (5) growing potential resolve that a solution would be found; and (6) vivid recall of incidents and developments during dispute. More structured research is recommended for conflicts that equally involved a third party who was typically not present. This research acts as a framework for further study and investigations, and includes five recommendations for the focus of future research. Also included are a model of the path of parent-school conflict and three appendices: (1) request for permission to conduct research; (2) guidelines for selection of subjects; and (3) interview questions. (21 references) (LAP)

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PARENT-SCHOOL CONFLICT

Vernon J. Storey

UVic Institute for Dispute Resolution

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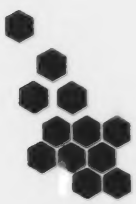
PARENT-SCHOOL CONFLICT: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

Report of a research study funded by the
University of Victoria Institute for Dispute Resolution

Vernon J. Storey

November, 1990



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Particular thanks are extended to the individuals and groups who contributed to this study. Several British Columbia school districts granted permission for the research to be carried out, and thirteen families agreed to be interviewed for the study. After a frustrating search for material on parent-school conflict, Randy Kaneen carried out and discussed with the writer a thoughtful examination of the role of stress and anger in conflict.

Because of the need to respect the promised anonymity of these families, their names and those of the school districts involved cannot be included in this report. Without their assistance, though, it would not have been possible to carry out the study, and their willing participation was much appreciated.

ABSTRACT

This exploratory study sought to identify a range of conflicts which had occurred between several parents and sets of parents and the schools their children attended, as perceived by the parents themselves. The parents of twelve families were interviewed in depth about unresolved conflict situations in which they and their children had been involved. In ten of the cases, the child had been moved to another school because of the dispute.

The study found that almost all of the disputes had been of long duration. The shortest one, which was also the only one which had been successfully resolved, lasted only a few weeks. The others lasted for periods ranging from just under one year to more than nine years. Several related to the child's need for special education services.

The study also found that the child was almost always an absent third party. Very few had been involved in any meetings or discussions to seek a resolution to the dispute. Several parents reported a perception that they had been stereotyped by school personnel, some on the basis of gender, others simply because they were parents.

The study identified several key emotional components of the conflict situations studied. These included: emotional upset on the child's part, parents' fear for the child's educational and emotional wellbeing, a general intensity of feeling about the progression of events, concern about the perceived attitudes of school personnel, a growing parental resolve that a solution would be found, and vivid, intense recall of incidents and developments during the life of the dispute.

The study recommended further, more structured research into this specific manifestation of conflict: a dispute between two parties which equally involved a third party who was typically not present. It also recommended that schools and school districts provide training opportunities

for both parents and school personnel in communication and dispute resolution.

One primary intent of the study was to provide a framework for further study and discussion of the topic of parent-school conflict. A model was developed and outlined in the research report, with the intent that it be utilized in subsequent research investigations and in plans to implement the study's recommendations.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Relationships among people carry with them the unavoidable possibility of conflict. We will often avoid it or deny its presence. We may tolerate it or we may seek to mitigate it. At times, we may even encourage it, and in some cases, we will resolve it. The potential for conflict between individuals, though, is real and often realized. I may want more of something, or I may want less. You may be standing in my way or I in yours. There are times when our interests are competitive, and conflict seems an almost inevitable outgrowth of that competition. The same pattern is evident between us as individuals, in our group-to-group differences, between labour and management, and between citizens and their governments.

Some patterns of conflict, though, stand apart because they exist in a unique context. Conflict between parents and schools offers such an exception, and that particular category of conflict is the focus of this exploratory study.

The context in which parent-school conflict occurs is shaped by at least three sets of considerations. The first two of these, **structural considerations** and **process considerations**, include factors which are quite unique in some respects to schools. The factors in the third set, **environmental considerations**, are perhaps more generally applicable. Within each set of considerations, there are factors which provide important background for an examination of incidents and patterns of conflict.

Disagreements and disputes between parents and school people (teachers and administrators) are embedded in the structure of the school. In the first place, schooling is compulsory for all children, at least until their mid-

teens. They must be schooled, and there are sanctions in place to deal with situations where parents or guardians do not ensure that schooling takes place.

The compulsory nature of schooling can affect profoundly the relationship between parents and schools. Faced with a serious and unresolved dispute, the parent has relatively few options. The simplest and most frequent strategy, particularly if the conflict occurs between child or parent and teacher, is to move the child to another class. Beyond that, the child may be moved to another school. Some parents may place their child in an independent school, and a few will educate him or her at home.

Each strategy is limited in its availability or its applicability. In some schools, there is no other class available. District policy, home location or family employment may rule out a change of school. The parent who cannot afford to enrol the child in an independent school or who stands on the right of the child to be educated in a public school will not use that recourse. Very few families are able or willing to take on the responsibility of home schooling.

Not all disputes are unresolved, and not all disputes require consideration of placement options. These examples, though, illustrate the fact that the compulsory nature of schooling, combined with some severe limitations on the possibilities for action when a dispute cannot be resolved, are significant realities within a troubled relationship.

The second structural factor relates to the nature of schools as relatively closed institutions. They are clearly marked by boundaries of practice, expectation and language. They are culturally strong and, in the perception of some, relatively resistant to external influences. That structural dimension is related closely to the first factor in the second set

of considerations.

Process considerations form perhaps the most significant cluster of realities surrounding parent-school conflict. In the first place, there is a strong lay-professional barrier between schools and the adults who stand outside them. Almost every adult has him/herself attended school, and individual memories will almost certainly affect current perceptions, whether positively or negatively. Beyond that, few parents outside the system understand the special language of schools. Like doctors, dentists and lawyers, school people use terms which are often at best ill understood by and at worse intimidating to parents. Of necessity, professional language is used to address professional concerns. If that separation is complicated by a lack of formal education on the parent's part, the gulf may be wide and fixed. Some would argue that students and parents do not occupy positions on a level playing field with teachers and school administrators.

The question, then, might be: who occupies the uphill position? Parents may see themselves as operating at a disadvantage in their dealings with schools. They may often operate in these conflict situations without the knowledge, information or vocabulary necessary to address the issues at hand. Their views of what is likely to happen as a result of their engagement with the school may be colored by their perceptions of whether the school is open or closed, receptive or non-receptive, welcoming or cold, helpful or obstructive.

Second, parent-school conflict is characterized by the fact that it occurs most often between parents and school people (teachers and principals) about a third party, the child, who is usually absent from the discussions and yet is the focus of the dispute. The student is most often not present for debate and decisions about his/her school life.

Third, parents stand outside the school and are not bound by its rules

and norms. Within the school, teachers, administrators and pupils are bound by its expectations, conventions and procedures. There are established protocols for dealing with disputes, and difficulties, in most cases, are addressed within the system.

Schools cannot by extension hold similar expectations for the parents of their students, although some parents adhere more closely to the school's norms and expectations than we might expect, because of their own earlier experiences with schools as symbols of authority. When parents are dissatisfied with the outcome of their engagement with school people, they may pursue their grievances beyond the school. When they do, parents have open to them a variety of "non-school" options. They may seek the support of other parents as their advocates and supporters. They may go beyond the school to a school board official or to the Board itself. They may react by withdrawing their child from school.

In addition to the structural and process considerations noted above, the nature and often the outcome of parent-school disputes may be affected by one or more **environmental considerations**. In this regard, schools are not alone. First, we live in a time when few are as prepared as they might once have been to accept unquestioningly the positions, decisions and edicts of institutions. We are more likely than before to challenge, to question, and to mistrust experts in our society. Parents are no exception. They are conscious of their rights as citizens and as parents, and more than ever before prepared to be assertive and to demand those rights from institutions which they see as unresponsive.

Second, our schools are dealing with children whose family settings are in many cases sharply different from the norm experienced by many parents and teachers during their own growing years. It is not always possible for both

parents, or even one, to come to the school during the day to meet with the teacher. In many cases, there is only one parent. That fact alone is likely to sharpen the intensity of disputes, and may affect significantly both the strategies used to effect a resolution, and the nature of the outcome itself.

In many instances, disputes between parents and schools are resolved to the satisfaction of all concerned. The solutions vary as widely as the problems. Where there is no resolution, though, there is often the possibility of serious consequences, not only for the parent-school relationship, but more important, for the welfare of the child. Some unresolved conflicts may simmer just below the surface of relationships between children, parents, teachers and principals. Over a period of time, some unresolved conflicts may move back and forth between "simmer" and "boil." Regardless of the pattern, all of the parties involved are affected, often deeply, by conflict surrounding a child who must spend a substantial amount of the day in the company of each of the adults who are involved in the dispute.

Our final point of reference in the search for a civilized resolution to our conflicts is usually recourse to a third party. For the parent, that recourse may be to the school board, or perhaps to the local community or to the legal system. Many disputes between parents and schools, though, are not of a nature that they will have a remedy at law. That does not mean that they are trivial. Where they remain unresolved, the consequences, including the emotional consequences for one or more of the parties involved, can be serious.

The Search for Understanding

The phenomenon of conflict between parents and schools about students remains largely unexplored. We need to identify the range of conflicts which occur in this setting and to ascertain how parents and school people view and seek to resolve these problems. The present exploratory study had two overall

objectives. The first was to establish baseline data in this relatively unexplored area. The second was to develop a preliminary model which could be used as the basis of further research into the topic of parent-school conflict.

The study sought preliminary answers to the following questions:

1. How might the range of conflicts between parents and school people be described?
2. What are the perceptions of parents of the interaction between themselves and school people and other parties in these conflict situations?
3. Where a dispute remains unresolved, what do parents identify as the reasons?
4. What strategies do parents use in their efforts to resolve disputes?
5. What have been the characteristics of successful dispute resolution processes?

The cost of unresolved conflict, in terms of its impact on the human beings involved, is high. Its impact on the motivation and capabilities of teachers and students, and on the lives of parents, is a price which is difficult to justify, even though it is often exacted.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Parent-school conflict is in some respects a unique area of study. We typically think of conflict situations as involving two parties, or at least two conflicting sets of interests. Yet where conflict between parents and schools is concerned, the conflict is almost always about the child or children of the parent(s) involved in the dispute. Further, as is reported elsewhere in this report, the child who is the focus is seldom present for meetings about the conflict.

These and other distinctions mark off parent-school conflict as a distinct area for study. An examination of the literature reveals that it is also an area of very little previous research. A recent Canadian publication on alternative dispute resolution, for example (Canadian Bar Association, 1989, pp. 50-51), includes in its section on schools a reference only to curricular dispute resolution projects for students. It makes no mention of conflict between parents and schools. At least one major text addressing the issue of conflict (Wirt and Kirst, 1982) focuses only on the group aspect of conflict over schools policy, mentioning parents only as a group and in a discussion of shared control (1982, pp. 8-11). Even an examination of literature from other areas in which a similar three-way conflict situation might frequently arise, e.g. child and youth care, revealed no findings on the phenomenon of conflict between two parties about an absent third party.

The focus therefore shifted to some of the more general or conceptual literature about **parent-school relations**, to an investigation of the literature on **theoretical models of conflict**, and to a review of materials written about the phenomena of **stress, anger, and response**. Since the present study was exploratory in nature, these three strands of literature provided a general frame of reference for the research.

One of the primary characteristics of exploratory research is derived directly from its name: it "is conducted to explore a topic, to provide a beginning familiarity with that topic...when the subject is itself relatively new and unstudied" (Babbie, 1986, p. 72). For this reason, a conceptual framework for the study is sometimes developed after a naturalistic inquiry has taken place. That is the case in this study. Because of this developmental approach, it is essential to identify a body of theory-focused literature which can provide a plausible context within which the study data can be analyzed with the end in mind of developing a framework for further investigation. In the present study, that became the criterion for selecting the three areas of focus for this review of literature.

Parent-School Relations

Much recent literature has focused on the growing, almost pervasive depersonalization of our society, often closely associated with rapid technological development. There is a growing feeling on the part of some that we are experiencing a time of the individual's inability to influence the course of surrounding events, even to control the decisions we make about the circumstances of our own lives. Kent, in describing this scene, notes that

> In short, the consequence of our contemporary change is that more and more things are brought into the area that somebody does something about, but for the individual that somebody is more and more a remote "they." The individual feels controlled by forces that he knows to be in human hands but to him are massive, unpredictable if not capricious, indifferent if not actually malignant, certainly beyond his influence.(1981, pp. 2-3)

We might also describe our current social setting as a time when we carry a mistrust of experts and large, impersonal organizations; a mistrust which is often exacerbated by the effects of technology and which in its later stages may become a demand for influence upon and response from those institutions. Kent notes that as we examine our social structures,

> The characteristic that marks our times off from the past is the tension which derives from the twin effects of contemporary technology, which enhances the capability of the individual but also the status of the organization. The position of the individual is stronger but the circumstances of...living and working are depersonalized. (Kent, 1981, p. 4)

In this same social context, we see on the other hand a desire and a press for the development of partnerships between parents and schools, perhaps in part as a reaction to the depersonalization of the larger society. There is a growing issue of parents' rights to influence, or at least to have good communication with the schools which their children attend. In British Columbia, for example, a key reference group engaged by a recent Royal Commission of Inquiry into education asserted strongly that parents should be regarded as

> equal and responsible partners in education...A parent, therefore, has the right to act, to be an advocate, on behalf of the child in order to ensure that the best interests of the child are realized. (Working Group on the Parents' Role, 1988, pp. 24,27)

Views about the extent to which schools are sensitive to the needs of students and responsive to parents vary widely, and have for many years. Ellen Lurie, a New York school reform activist and a member of the United Bronx Parents in the 1960s, was harshly critical of the schools of the day:

> The basic reason we have schools, after all, is to teach the children...and in our large cities today, that simply does not happen. These schools exist for the sake of the system. The children are barely tolerated...The children simply serve the system. And that is intolerable. (1970, p. 10)

Lurie's radical view and approach may not have been shared by all of her contemporaries, and may not be shared by all who read her material today. However, many would probably assert that schools in some respects share the impersonality experienced in the larger society. Ost suggests that

> parents and the society-at-large feel disenfranchised from the schooling process. Teachers and schools tend to operate in isolation from the culture and , basic to this isolation, there is a hiatus between parents and teachers. (1988, p. 165)

There is a growing body of literature which suggests that parents have a right to be involved at an influential level with the schools their children attend. Beyond that, there is a growing body of research findings which suggest that a closer parent-school relationship may impact childrens' learning. Henderson cites a bibliographic survey of research findings which was assembled in 1981 and updated in 1987 by the National Committee for Citizens in Education in the United States. The study reported that:

> The findings of all the [35] studies were positive: parent involvement in almost any form appears to produce measurable gains in student achievement ... Eighteen new studies...place the conclusion well beyond doubt. (1988, p. 149)

There is in the literature, then, a set of compelling arguments for schools to attend to their relationship with parents; schools which seek to be responsive to parents and which recognize and seek to address the alienation felt by some parents. The literature cited to this point has focused on broader issues of parent-school relationship. It provides a useful backdrop against which to view the data gathered for the present study. In view of the purposes of the present study and its concern with conflict between individual families, individual teachers and administrators and individual schools, there is a need to examine a model which may help in the analysis of specific conflict situations.

Storey (1989) has developed an analytical model for examining the relationships between parents and schools according to three sets of descriptors: **dimensions of relationship**, **parent stance**, and **administrator and teacher stance** (Figure 1). The primary application of this model is to the investigation of the relational scene in the school. For purposes of this study, it should be noted that two of the descriptor sets, **parent stance** and **administrator and teacher stance**, describe relationships among individuals. The **dimensions of relationship** set, on the other hand, addresses overall

regularities of relationship which are more likely to be descriptive of the school's method of operation rather than of individual relationships.

For this reason, it will be useful to modify the model slightly for purposes of the present study (Figure 2). Since we are not concerned about the overall strategies of relationship between the school and the parents, several of the lines between the dimensions of relationship and the stances of the various parties may be eliminated. What remain are the elements of the model which will allow a focus on those aspects of the parent-school relationship which move into sharp relief when a conflict situation arises: the stances taken by parents and school people in their efforts to address the situation.

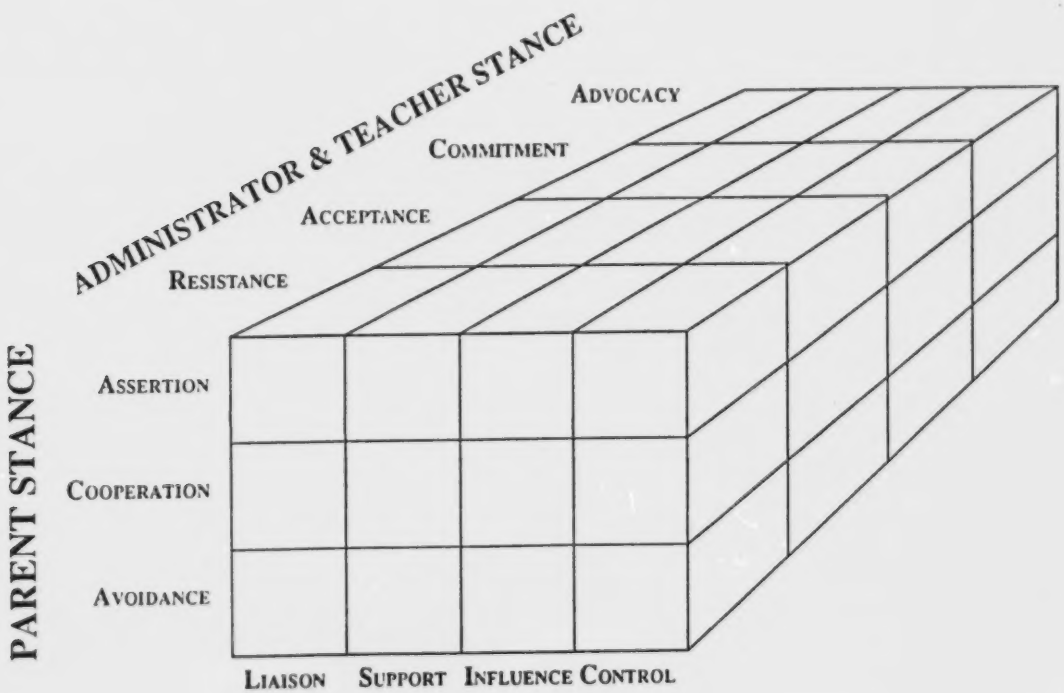

Figure 1. A model of parent-school relationships (Storey, 1989)

Further, as Figure 2 indicates, the words "resistance" and "assertion" will be applicable both to parents and to teachers/administrators, depending on the details of the particular conflict situation. The other terms used to describe the stances of these parties in the overall parent-school relationship are less applicable to this specific inquiry into parent-school conflict.

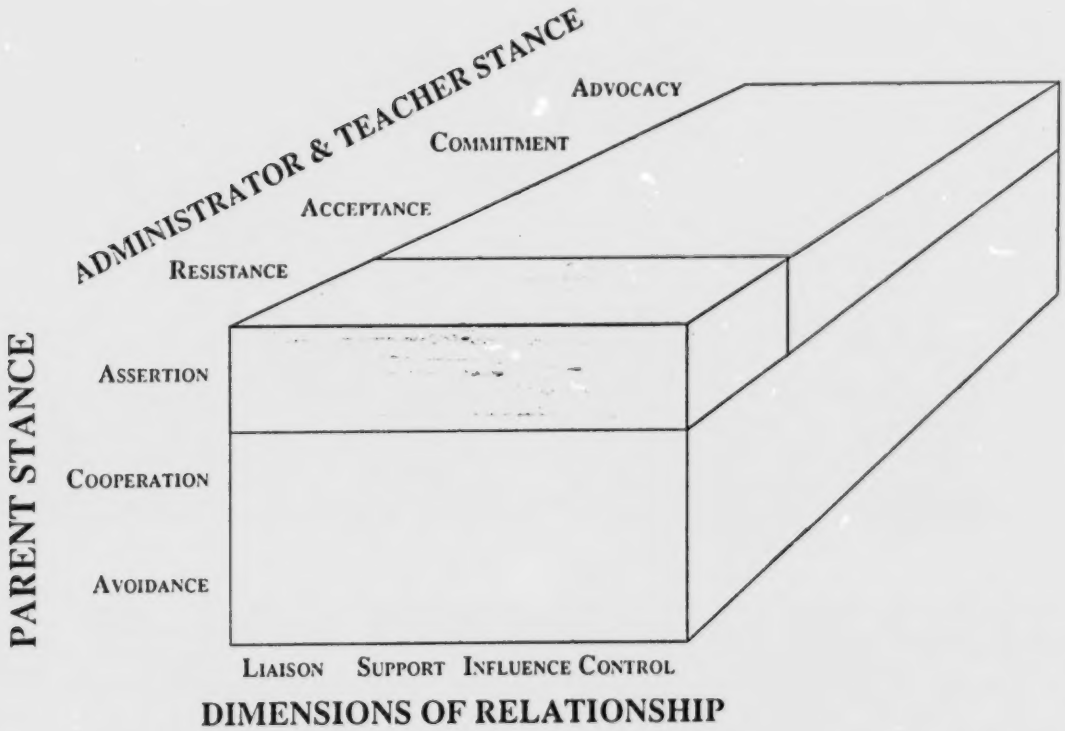

Figure 2. Analyzing parent-school conflict (ref. Storey, 1989)

Definitions and Theoretical Models of Conflict

The words "conflict" and "dispute" are often used interchangeably, yet the literature suggests that there is a distinction between the two terms. If we are to communicate clearly, it essential that we work from common understandings and use a common terminology. It is also important that we establish a clear conception of the phenomenon we are examining, in this case conflict between parents and schools. This section will present definitions of the relevant terms and a model for understanding and analyzing conflict and disputes.

Defining Conflict and Dispute

Folberg and Taylor (1984, p. 19) identify two kinds of conflict: intrapersonal and interpersonal. They make the point that interpersonal conflict, or conflict between individuals and groups, the variety with which the present study is concerned, may also derive from or arouse intrapersonal conflict, or conflict within the individual.

These authors also make a useful distinction between conflict and dispute. Citing Abel (1973), they suggest that

> A dispute is an interpersonal conflict that is communicated or manifest. A conflict may not become a dispute if it is not communicated to someone in the form of a perceived incompatibility or a contested claim. (1984, p.19)

By these authors' definition, conflict implies noncommunication, even unawareness on one person's part, of the differences which exist. Yet Boulding's earlier definition of conflict suggests that "the parties are aware of the incompatibility...and...each party wishes to occupy a position which is incompatible with the wishes of the other" (1962, p. 5). Referring to the difference in definitions which occurs throughout the literature, Folberg and Taylor comment that "Others have called this dichotomy between the overt

dispute and the hidden conflict between the presenting problem and the hidden agenda, respectively" (1984, p. 23). Yet even these authors speak in at least one instance of conflict as though it was, by their definition, dispute, when they

> regard conflict as a set of divergent aims, methods, or behavior...We define the opposite of conflict as convergence: the aims, processes, methods, or behavior that create order, stability and unity of direction. (1984, p. 24)

Most authors do not make the distinction which Folberg and Taylor make in their definitions of conflict and dispute. Most tend rather to use the term conflict to identify both of these concepts. Moore, in a work on the subject of mediation, divides conflict into two categories:

> Emerging conflicts are disputes in which the parties are identified, they acknowledge that there is a dispute, and most issues are clear, but no workable negotiation or problem-solving process has developed. Emerging conflicts have a potential for escalation if a resolution procedure is not implemented...Both parties recognize that there is a dispute...but neither knows how to handle the problem...
>
> Manifest conflicts are those in which parties are engaged in an ongoing dispute, may have started to negotiate, and may have reached an impasse. (1986, p. 16)

Current common usage may suggest that the operative word will be conflict, regardless of the stage the difference may have reached. Yet the current movement toward alternative dispute resolution implies that there is a distinction between the two terms. At the very least, it is important to know, when a term is being used, just what is meant by that term.

A Descriptive Model of Conflict

Moore has developed a useful model for diagnosing and addressing conflict, titled Sphere of Conflict - Causes and Interventions. In this model, five kinds of conflict situations are identified: interest conflicts, structural conflicts, value conflicts, relationship conflicts and data conflicts. For each type, Moore (1986, p. 27) identifies several causes and

several possible interventions. This writer's focus, as a mediator, is on using interest-based strategies rather than positional bargaining, and this is reflected in the choice of interest-based intervention strategies.

Three of the types of conflict identified by Moore seem particularly relevant to the topic of parent-school conflict. The first is **interest conflict**. One cause of interest conflict, perceived or actually competitive interests, relates to the differences which might exist between teacher or administrator and parent over the handling or instruction of a child.

The second relevant type of conflict is **structural conflict**. The listed causes of this type of conflict relate particularly to the nature of the school as an institution, perhaps as a bureaucracy. Moore identifies five possible causes of structural conflict, three of which seem particularly relevant: destructive patterns of behavior or interaction; unequal control, ownership, or distribution of resources; and unequal power and authority. Each might be expressed as a problem area by the parent who is in dispute with the school.

The third area for comment is **relationship conflict**. It would seem that the potential for this type of conflict is high because of the three-party characteristic of parent-school conflict. It may be heightened if the discussions during the dispute take place only between parents and teacher and do not include the child. Moore suggests four causes for relationship conflicts: strong emotions, misperceptions or stereotypes, poor communication, and repetitive negative behavior.

Moore's model is highly relevant for the study of parent-school conflict. At least three of the identified types of conflict seem to characterize many of the disputes which occur in this area of human interaction. Further, in addition to identifying types and causes of conflict, Moore provides numerous practical suggestions for dealing with the

particular type of conflict situation encountered. In addition to its contribution to our study of the phenomenon of interpersonal conflict, the model has considerable utility for training purposes.

Stress, Anger and Response

Definitions of stress vary, but most parents who have been in conflict with a school over matters relating to their children would probably agree that the experience was highly stressful. Most teachers and school administrators would probably share that view. It seems logical to assume also that because the conflict is about a third party who is usually not an active participant in the effort to resolve the conflict, the stress of the situation is likely to be intensified.

Little has been written about this specific manifestation of conflict. Beyond that, few writers even use it to provide illustrative examples. However, the more general literature on stress, power and influence and response is helpful in understanding parent-school conflict as a specific case.

Houston defines psychological stress as "the experience of negative feelings...anxiety, fear, depression, anger, and the like" (1987, p. 377). If psychological stress, perhaps manifested by one or more of these negative feelings, is associated with conflict between parents and schools, then the urgency of resolving the matter becomes clear. In a society marked in some ways by anxiety, fear, depression and anger, schools and parents themselves have a vested interest in eliminating those feelings as expeditiously as possible and in ways that will ensure that they do not recur.

Most, if not all parents want the best for their children. It follows, then, that parents will be upset if their children are upset. The experience of the child who is upset, or who in Houston's terms is encountering negative

feelings, is likely to be similar to that of others: anxiety, fear, depression, anger and the like.

In many cases, the parent perceives that the child's feelings, about school, about the teacher or about him/herself stand in the way of the parent's goal of achieving the best for that child. Both the parents' goals and the child's goals may be blocked. Houston suggests that "the perception of the thwarting of one's desires is one category of potential psychological stressors" (1987, p. 380)

Houston goes on to point out a variety of responses which people use to cope with stress, or negative feelings, listing several strategies under the heading of "overt, action-oriented coping responses" (1987, p. 391). Two of the listed strategies seem particularly appropriate to the present study of situations in which parents and schools are in conflict. The first is avoidance or escape, and the second is circumventing or thwarting situations.

In the first instance, Houston suggests that

> There are several ways in which people can avoid or escape aversive situations. One is simply physically to avoid or escape aversive situations or the people or things that may cause aversive events. Thus people may leave (escape) an embarrassing social situation. (1987, p. 391)

The second strategy identified by Houston is to circumvent the situation. Early in this report, mention was made of the fact that parents in conflict with schools have open to them a wide variety of strategies not generally available to teachers and administrators. One of these is to bypass the school principal and go directly to a senior school district official, or perhaps to another school's principal to seek a change of school. This was the strategy chosen by several of the interviewees for the present study. Houston notes that

> When a person or thing is responsible for the thwarting of a desire, a coping possibility is to go around or circumvent the obstacle. For instance, if a supervisor is not responsive to a person's grievance, the person can bypass the supervisor and deal

with the supervisor's supervisor. (1987, p. 393)

One of the negative feelings listed by Houston was anger. It might be expected that anger, perhaps accompanied by anxiety, would characterize many situations of conflict between parents and schools. Averill, in a book-length essay on emotion, reports the findings of several studies, one of which involved 160 subjects, half from the general adult population and half from among college students enrolled in introductory psychology courses. From this research, Averill identified six key factors which were involved in the instigation to anger. Three of the six are particularly relevant to the study of situations of conflict between parents and school people:

> 1. Frustration or the interruption of some ongoing or planned activity.
>
> 2. An event, action, or attitude which resulted in a loss of personal pride, self-esteem, or sense of personal worth...
>
> 4. Violation of socially accepted ways of behaving or widely shared rules of conduct. (1982, p. 174)

In most cases, the subjects in Averill's study "regarded the instigation to be either unjustified or avoidable" (1982, p. 174), a factor which probably exacerbated the individual's anger. It may be that a parent's anger with a teacher, for example, stems from a perception that a particular action by the teacher toward the child was unfair or unjustified.

Averill also found that although anger is often a response to an action that is perceived as unfair or inequitable, that anger is not usually destructive in its intent or its manifestation:

> anger is, more often than not, constructively motivated - the objective is not primarily to harm or inflict pain on the target, but rather to change the conditions that led to the instigation...the instigation to anger - in the overwhelming majority of cases - involves some perceived wrong. (1982, p. 183)

If one is angry, and if the anger is instigated in part by a thwarting of the individual's objectives, it follows that one will search for ways to

recover the original aim. That will demand the exercise of power. Tedeschi, Schlenker and Bonoma note that "Theorists have consistently qualified definitions of social power as the ability to implement one's will **despite resistance**" (1973, p. 51). Yet for the individual who sees that a conflict will result in the need, eventually, to do battle with an institution, power often seem remote in its availability. The challenge then is to find ways influence can be applied.

Numerous writers have identified various types of power and influence. Raven and Kruglaski, in their discussion of unilateral power, note six means or strategies for influencing the holder of such power to accede to demands. Two of these strategies are relevant to the present investigation: informational influence and legitimate influence.

The first recourse of the parent who realizes that there is a need to visit the school to try and clear up a problem identified by the child may be to provide information which the teacher or principal may not have. For example, the child may tell her mother that she had gotten into trouble with her teacher and was being penalized for falling asleep in class. Her mother, thinking that the teacher had overreacted, might go to the school to explain that the family had arrived home very late the night before from attending an out-of-town music festival in which the child was competing. In fact, the mother might tell the teacher that the only reason the child was in school at all was her own insistence that she did not want to miss. The mother's attempt to have the penalty lifted is "**informational influence**, or persuasion...by providing information not previously available...by pointing out contingencies"(1970, p. 73)

The teacher, on other hand, might not accept the explanation. Raven and Kruglaski point out that

> Failure of informational influence often stems from the

> failure to appreciate the value system of the person upon whom influence is attempted, including the large number of values which tend to support the original behavior. (1970, p. 73)

The other relevant strategy to influence the holder of unilateral power is **legitimate influence**. Many parents would argue legitimately that their opinions and requests deserve close consideration because of their special status as parents - they are not simply members of the community who happen to live near the school. Pressed to the extreme by the parent or resisted in the extreme by the teacher or administrator, the claim may escalate rather than mitigate conflict. Raven and Kruglaski indicate clearly the meaning and use of legitimate influence:

> Legitimate influence of A over B stems from internalized values of B which dictate that A, by virtue of his role or position, has the right to prescribe behavior for B in a given domain, and B is obliged to comply...It is limited to situations in which the person on whom influence is attempted, both accepts the basis for legitimacy, and recognizes that the influencer occupies the position which specifically vests such legitimate power in him. (1970, pp. 74-75)

The absence of prior research in the specific area of focus of the present study has necessitated an examination of the literature in other areas which might inform the present topic of parent-school conflict. The topic itself has not been a major topic of investigation, which is surprising in view of the vast numbers of children in schools and the even greater number of parents of those children. Yet the subjects examined in this review: parent-school relations, the question of conflict in general, and the issues of stress, anger, power and influence, have been well researched. They provide a foundation for the exploratory examination presented in this report..pa

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH DESIGN AND STUDY PROCEDURES

It became clear during the search for relevant literature and data from previous studies that the phenomenon of parent-school conflict was largely unexplored. The general literature on conflict was helpful, but specific findings from studies of this topic were not readily available.

It also became clear from early discussions with colleagues and people who were periodically involved in conflict episodes and situations during the course of their work that this was a sensitive topic. In particular, gaining the participation of subjects would probably prove somewhat difficult and would certainly have to be handled carefully. Clearly, the choice of a strategy for identifying and selecting participants would be crucial to the success of the study.

An important early step in the search for understanding of the phenomenon of parent-school conflict would be to determine whether there were any commonalities of pattern among the conflict situations reported by respondents. If that were the case, it may be possible to develop a preliminary descriptive model for discussion and further investigation of the phenomenon.

Given this background and the objectives of the study, it was clear that the inquiry would be exploratory and inductive in nature, of a style which

> begins with collection of data - empirical observations or measurements of some kind - and builds theoretical categories and propositions from relationships discovered among the data. (Goetz and LeCompte, 1984, p.4)

An in-depth interview study of a small sample of parents who had experienced serious conflict situations was selected as a useful means of examining the problem. If the researcher could enter the interview situation with the aim of eliciting descriptive information from participating parents,

the groundwork could be laid for an attempt to systematize the data and identify patterns and regularities.

Sample Identification

Four British Columbia school districts were approached for permission to conduct research (Appendix A). One did not respond; three granted permission, and subjects were actually obtained from two districts, referred to in this report as District A and District B.

The process of identifying potential subjects was somewhat more difficult than it might have been for a different, less sensitive topic. The researcher had two concerns which arose from the fact that the conflict situations would have to be identified by school personnel in order for subjects to be selected. The first was to gain the cooperation of school principals who, understandably, might be reluctant to name subjects with whom they were presently in dispute. The second was to ensure, as far as possible, that the research process would not result in the "rekindling" of an old dispute. Such an occurrence carried the potential of having a negative effect on the parents themselves, on the relationship between them and the school, or on both.

The researcher met with the administrators' groups in three of the districts to explain the research and to secure the names of principals who would be willing to receive a follow-up telephone call with more details. In the meetings and again during the follow-up calls, the two potential problems identified above were raised by the researcher. In an effort to avoid their occurrence, the following criteria for subject selection were established:

1. The principal was aware of a previous conflict situation involving these parents and another school.
2. That previous situation was a major factor in a

decision or request by the parents to place their son or daughter in the present school.

3. There was presently no home-school dispute, as far as the principal was aware.

The initial contact with potential participants was made by the principal of the present school. The nature and purposes of the study were explained by the principal, and assurance was given that the content of the interviews would be confidential. Parents were advised that there would not be a follow-up interview or other contact with school personnel, but that the study was of parents' perceptions of the conflict situation.

Twelve in-depth interviews were held with subjects identified in this manner. Eight were from District A and two were from District B. The remaining two were identified by colleagues of the researcher who were aware of the research and felt that they knew of a qualifying subject.

Interview Procedures

At the beginning of each interview, the research was explained briefly, confidentiality was once again assured, and permission to use a tape recorder was obtained. Being recorded seemed to be a new experience for most subjects, but all agreed, and none seemed to be deterred by the machine's presence. The researcher also indicated that he did not wish to know the identities of school people who had been involved in the conflict situation. Interviews averaged one hour in length.

The interviews were semi-structured, in that while a structured list of questions was used (Appendix B), not all were asked in every case - some respondents preferred to tell the story of the conflict in their own way, and in so doing, covered several of the questions without further prompting. During the course of the interview process, three questions were added. Two of these questions were intended to explore whether the use of a metaphor by

participants to describe their feelings during the conflict situation would be helpful. The other was intended to clarify what seemed to be emerging frequently as a sequence of conflict occurrences ending in a critical incident. The subjects in this study had all moved the child who was the focus of the conflict situation from their previous school. It appeared that a critical incident was the occurrence which finally resulted in that decision.

Discussion of the Study Method

In some respects, this study paralleled case study research, in that each of the conflict situations described represents a discrete and separate pattern of events. However, it differs from a full-blown case study in that there were clear limitations on the dimensions of the problem that could be explored. The major one was the fact that the school people who had been involved in the problem - teachers and principals, primarily - were not involved as subjects for data collection.

The study shares with case studies the characteristic that "the objective is not to tell a story about something already believed to exist, but to investigate a problem" (Anderson, 1986, p.308), in this case the problem of conflict between parents and schools. That fact marks it clearly as an exploratory study, and one for which it would have been premature to attempt to identify and test hypotheses. Kerlinger notes that

> exploratory research seeks to discover significant variables in the field situation, to discover relationships among variables, and to lay the groundwork for later, more rigorous testing of hypotheses.
> (1973, p. 406)

Typically, on the basis of a preliminary consideration of the problem and a review of the literature and previous research into a similar issue, the researcher establishes a conceptual framework which will provide an entree

into the investigation and shape the treatment of the findings. That is not the case in this study. The preliminary framework which follows the presentation of the findings emerged from the data obtained from a very small subject group. Given the absence of other such frameworks, the model presented in this report may be useful in the formulation of further investigations. As an outcome of the present study, though, it must assume the status of an early idea.

Delimitations and Limitations

The study was delimited to include only those parents or sets of parents, twelve in all, who were selected for this investigation. As an exploratory study, its findings can be used as the basis for study and further investigation, but not for generalization to other populations. The conceptual framework, also, requires further use and testing in other situations.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY: TWELVE CASES OF CONFLICT

The objective of investigating the accounts of parent-school conflict which inform the present study was "not to tell a story about something already believed to exist, but to investigate a problem" (Anderson, 1986, p. 308). The investigation of that problem led to the decision to report each of the case examples as an individual story, to preserve as much as possible of the meaning communicated by the parents and to ensure a clear separation among the cases in the mind of the reader.

Beyond their utility in providing a format for reporting the data, the case examples provide a basis for discussion of this type of conflict, perhaps in role play or simulation form. In this respect, the report of the findings may also have value as a professional development tool.

Each case has been masked to maintain the anonymity of the informants and of the other individuals involved. The names of all schools and district programs have been changed, and the community names are fictitious. In some cases, events and characteristics have been altered, again to protect promised anonymity, but only to the extent that the account will not lose meaning or overall accuracy.

These are the accounts given by twelve parents or sets of parents. They reflect the knowledge, impressions and feelings of those parents as expressed to the researcher. Because of the nature of the study, their comments were not verified by cross-checking with others involved - that was not the intent of the study.

Chuck Farnsworth: On the Buses, and Other Problems

According to Mike Smith, the principal of Leaf Ridge Elementary School, Mary Farnsworth was one of a small group of very active and supportive parents. Mike's relationship with her, as Mary confirmed in the interview, was one of mutual respect. Mary was a homemaker, and her husband Wally drove a logging truck, a job which meant that he left for work each day at 2:00 a.m. and returned in time for supper. Mary spent much time at the school, where her son Chuck attended, working on various volunteer tasks.

The Farnsworths lived several miles from the school, and Chuck, the youngest of four children, rode the school bus, as had his older siblings. That routine, in fact, gave rise to the conflict between the Farnsworths and the school, or more accurately, between them and the school bus driver.

Mary Farnsworth first became aware that all was not well when she heard that the driver had threatened to put Chuck off the bus for making too much noise and ignoring the driver's instructions to be quiet. She was supportive of the driver in his efforts to deal with the problem, but upset that

> he threatened to put my son off the bus between the school and my home, which is seven miles from the school, and that can be very threatening to an eleven or twelve year old child.

Mary also expressed concerned about the bus driver's driving habits, particularly what she saw as excessive speed:

> Like if you followed him with your car, it was faster than what the speed limit would be, and to pass a bus with sixty children on it or something when he was going 100 clicks and you had to go 110 to pass him, it was not a good idea.

Mary's major expressed concern, though, was with the fact that the bus driver, who was apparently going through marital difficulties, had been telling that to the students, particularly when he was angry with them. On one occasion, she said, he had yelled words to the effect of "Listen, I'm having family problems, my wife is going to leave, and...if you don't shut up,

you're either off the bus or I'm going to give you a good smack."

Mary expressed sympathy for the difficulties facing school bus drivers, commenting "I realize that kids do get out of hand, and there's nothing you can do. I know - I have three teenagers, and they get <u>way</u> out of hand." Repeatedly throughout the interview, though, Mary expressed concern that the driver had been talking about his personal problems in front of his passengers.

She said "What happens between an adult and his family has nothing to do with my child or the busing arrangements...it's just something <u>you</u> deal with." The question running through her mind, she said, was "Why does my son know about this man's personal life?"

Mary's expressed concern was more than a feeling that the bus driver's personal disclosures were inappropriate. She saw in the situation a threat to her child's emotional wellbeing, and she felt that he ought not to be carrying the burdens of this adult's problems:

> To me, your personal life is not a joke to anyone else, and those kids don't need to know about this personal thing...I knew that this bus driver more than likely would not carry through with the threat, but it was the fact that you're interfering with the way my child thinks, you're giving him things to think about that's your problem, it's not his problem...Maybe that's sounding very hard line, but kids have enough to think about in their lives without having to deal with someone that's having problems of their own. Wait until they're adults - they've got fifty years to deal with someone else's problems as well as their own, but not in elementary school. Just getting by is hard enough.

Unlike some of the other subject families, the Farnsworths did not remove their child from the school. Mary was determined to resolve the bus problem, though, and she could see clearly the point approaching when she would take further action. Referring to the driver's personal disclosures, she said, "That was, I guess, probably the point where I said, 'Enough is enough.'" As noted above, Mary reported that the driver had issued threats about removing children from the bus. Finally, she said "Okay, threats and

everything, this is enough. You've gotta draw the line someplace, and this happened to be my line, I guess."

Once the line had been drawn, Mary contacted the school district's transportation supervisor and demanded a meeting with all involved parties: the supervisor, the bus driver, the principal and herself. She said of this effort to resolve the problem:

> It was something that had to be dealt with by five or six parties, and they all had to agree on some kind of compromise. I believe that after the meeting, it basically worked out very well.

During the discussion of the bus incident, Mary commented on her perception, which emerged more clearly later, that she was treated differently as a woman and a mother than if she had been a man. She speculated that if there had been no positive results from her efforts to resolve the situation,

> then my husband would probably have stepped in and talked to the man himself. Sometimes woman to man doesn't go very well, and sometimes the man to man thing and that, they'll listen a little easier. Sometimes they think it's an overprotective mother flying off the handle or something, and sometimes the father talking to another man makes it a little bit easier, a little bit more comfortable for that other man.

At one point, Mary expressed concern about her son's possible reaction to her involvement in the situation. She gave no indication that Chuck had been present for any of the meetings, and although her fears were not realized, she was worried that

> my son might feel that I was an interfering mother, and that I shouldn't stick my nose in where maybe it doesn't belong...I didn't know what kind of repercussions my son might suffer because of involving so many people...They [driver and Chuck] both came to some kind of an agreement that, "How be we just kind of cohabit here together, and we'll make a go of it?" There wasn't any bad repercussions, or there wasn't any bad feelings, or anything. It was just something that had to be resolved, and Chuck and the bus driver, I guess, did realize that.

At one point the interview seemed over, and Mary made comments about her positive relationship with principal Mike Smith. Her comments seemed to

remind her of an earlier incident involving her daughter who had been harassed by three older boys. Doug Walker had been the principal at that time, and Mary expressed the feeling that her complaints were not taken seriously:

> I did come and talk to the principal and all I got was "Yeah, well, don't worry about it - kids will be kids," and I said, "Well, I am worried about it because it's more than one incident" and he said, "Well, don't get in a kafuffle about it," and I said, "Well, if you won't do anything about it, I will, so I did phone their parents...I did deal with that problem, and those boys did leave my daughter alone after that...I phoned and said, "I'm not going to put up with this no more."
>
> The principal that was here could have resolved it...and he wouldn't do it, you know, like he wouldn't step in and run interference for it - and that made me made mad, but the problems I've had since Mike Smith has been here have been minimal, because he's willing to go through the whole route.

Mary's earlier reference to her feeling that she was at risk of being treated differently because she was a woman than if she had been a man became one of her strongest points during the interview. She expressed the view that Doug Walker had rebuffed her efforts to resolve the problem surrounding her daughter. She spoke at length of her impressions of this differential treatment, and said she felt that the unspoken message to her was

> "Don't stick your nose in where it doesn't belong, because you're just a woman, you know," but I dealt with that kind of thing through soccer, and I basically told him, "You don't deal with it, I will, you know. I still have my rights, and so do my children, so you can either come forward and deal with it like you're supposed to, or I will."
>
> You know, no slanders on gender or anything, but my husband did come in and talk to that man at one point, and said, "You straighten out this mess," but it was nose to nose and man to man, and he got a response from this man, whereas when I dealt with the man, it was like, um, "You're an overprotective mother. Don't worry about it, it'll work itself out." That pissed me off, you know, because this is my child, whether I'm a woman or a man, it is my right to come in here and tell you how I feel and that if you don't do anything, I will. That one incident was resolved, but one incident that wasn't, my husband had to deal with himself...I don't know, you may get this feeling from other women, too, that are having to deal with a man.

It seemed clear that Mary felt very strongly about the treatment she perceived she had experienced from Doug Walker. Her final remark on the

subject was,

> When I complained, "Go away," you know,"you're an overprotective mother," but when he came, it was a different story, it was, like, nose to nose, "Listen, bucko, this is the way it's gonna be - deal with this," and it resolved itself...
>
> I mean, it was like overnight it was resolved, and I got the feeling that because I was who I was, and that, it was, "I don't want to talk to you. Go away, you're a nuisance." And when my husband went, it was like, "Maybe we'd better do something about this, because now they're both involved in it" ...so it did work out.

Dianne Carter: Permission Denied

> It wasn't any one issue, it was a series of things. It started when Dianne went into grade eight. She just wanted to go to Valley school, and I actually encouraged that...but they wouldn't arrange that, because Valley was overcrowded. So she went to Southside, and she was pretty fine there in grade eight; grade nine there were, ah, sort of a series of things that happened that motivated Dianne to want to go to Valley again.

From the outset, Rita Carter was quietly determined that her daughter would eventually go to Valley Secondary School. Yet permission to enrol outside of the regular attendance area had been denied, and Dianne began her secondary years at Southside.

There had been no major crises, no outright conflicts with school personnel, but as Rita said, "I guess the underlying reason was that I knew Dianne wasn't all that happy," at Southside. She knew the indicators of her daughter's unhappiness and the evidences of what she felt was an underlying concern:

> Dianne sort of has a thinking side of her that she doesn't express. She has sort of little habits. She did that when she went from kindergarten to grade one, and that was a different school. And it's like when there's some change in her life and she can't sort of express it, she develops a habit. One was playing with her hair, one was biting her nails...it got habitually worse, and it didn't seem like anything we could do would stop that...There were a few other things. She was unhappy with some of the teachers. She did have conflicts with a few of them - a couple, anyways, and, um, the atmosphere in the school...she thought a lot of the kids were immature.

Dianne was a good student who had maintained a steady B average. That pattern began to change in grade eight. Although Rita felt that Dianne was not in danger of failing her courses, her average had slipped by about one letter grade during her first year at Southside. Yet early in the year, the problem did not seem urgent. Rita knew that Dianne was unhappy, but the situation did not appear severe:

> I was just sort of listening to her when she had a problem, and sort of thinking, well, at the end of the year I would, you know, try and get her into Valley. There were kind of almost subtle

things that you sort of don't notice at the time, and then afterwards when you look back, you saw they were really there, and you chose to ignore it at the time.....I just sort of thought, well, maybe that would sort of blow over, and she'd just learn to deal with it...little things, not a lot of specifics...more like an attitude than anything you can sort of say, this is the specific reason.

Rita was frustrated during the process, partly because she felt that she did not necessarily have access to all of the relevant facts, and partly because, in her mind, there was no compelling reason why Dianne's transfer should have been disallowed:

> I was sort of, like, in the middle, because you don't really know exactly what's going on at the school...frustration, maybe, because I was thinking, if the kid isn't happy here, what's the difference if they go to another school?

Looking back after her eventual success in having Dianne transferred to Valley, Rita realized that her daughter had wanted her to press the matter more vigorously, or at least earlier. Perhaps the reason for the delay was that Rita had no doubt about the eventual outcome:

> I knew that it would happen, I guess. I didn't have very many doubts. It was just that it was an effort. I just told Dianne, "Don't worry."...I just kept reassuring her... I think she would have wanted me to go a little earlier...just make sure that in September she knew that she would be going there...she did put pressure on for a while.

That pressure became more acute when Dianne found out that her best friend had been granted permission to go to Valley the following year. Rita renewed her efforts to get Dianne into Valley, but met with resistance from the principal of Southside. In Rita's view, he was not necessarily opposed, but was less than interested in pursuing the matter, primarily because of changes in his own situation:

> I did go in June and talk to the principal at Southside...basically, he was leaving that school...He gave the impression that he didn't really care, he wasn't going to be there, let them deal with it when the time comes. You know, "Come back in September if we haven't ok'd it." He kind of, you know, didn't give me much encouragement. Well, he did sort of, in a way, because he gave me <u>more</u> encouragement to do something about

it!...It was just, don't bother me, I'm going, almost like, I'm going, so let the new principal worry about it.

At the beginning of September of Dianne's grade nine year, Rita decided to press the issue. She had decided to work within the system, but to take the matter as far as necessary to get a favourable decision. She knew the new principal at Southside, and found it easy to talk to him. Her visit was pleasant, but unproductive:

> He said ok, he'd see if he could arrange it...he said he'd get back to me. He phoned the next day and said he'd talked to the principal at Valley...they weren't prepared at this time to make a switch; the school was full, and he wasn't just sort of oking everyone that applied.
>
> So then I said, "Well, um, what other course is available to me? I definitely still want Dianne to go to Valley, and he said, well, I could talk to the principal at Valley, or...and I said I could also write a letter to or go and see Mr. _____ [the Superintendent of Schools] at the school board office, and I was prepared to do that, and I did tell [the principal at Southside] that.
>
> So then I came over to the school...here, the next day, I guess, and I, you know...introduced myself, and we had a chat, and I told him why I wanted Dianne to come here, and explained everything, and then he phoned me back and said that would be ok...I thought [the principal at Valley] was really easy to talk to and that, was definitely concerned.

Rita used an analogy to describe her sixteen-month struggle to secure a place for Dianne at Valley Secondary. She said, "It was a bit like beating your head against a brick wall, but I knew that the wall wasn't stopping me." She was well aware of the importance of pursuing the matter if she was to achieve the result she wanted:

> If I would have dropped it, that would have been it. The fact that I pushed it, yeah, and that they did know I was prepared to carry it, you know, as far as I could. So I was definitely prepared to do that, and I did express that to them. So I guess they thought it would maybe be ok'd in the end, and it would just save a lot of hassle, I don't know - they didn't explain it to me...I didn't care, no, what the reasons were, really. I didn't ask. You know, they didn't volunteer the information, so, um, I was just happy that she was able to go here, and I told them that I appreciated it.

Eric Bailey: Gone to the Museum

> The hardest thing was the child. He said, "You're not doing anything - nothing's ever changing." Yeah, and you try to reassure your child, and he doesn't believe you after a while, because nothing has changed. That's the hardest part.

Gene and Shirley Bailey had lived in an eastern Canada city for all of their married life. They had three boys, and the focus of this particular conversation was Eric, their youngest. Eric had finished grade five and was partway through grade six. At the end of Eric's grade five year, the family had moved to western Canada.

Eric had been enrolled in a program for gifted students since he had left kindergarten. The assessment of his giftedness was problematic from the beginning, because he was also learning disabled. In explaining some of Eric's difficulties, his mother said, "His thoughts don't go from here [pointing to her head] to the paper. Verbally, he's somewhere around grade eleven, and written, he works from around grade six down to grade three." Eric had excellent verbal skills, could respond well to complex questions, and could compose effectively using a computer. His difficulties were in writing - he knew the rules, but it was very difficult for him to write anything by hand, or to spell correctly.

Eric was an enthusiastic member of Cubs who had achieved all the badges he was able to get. He was an accomplished pianist and a champion swimmer. To top it off, he was a dedicated student. In his mother's view, "This kid's a keener. He's the type of student every teacher dreams of. He loves to learn."

The story related by Eric's parents began in the boy's grade five year:

> Eric was diagnosed...as learning disabled. He was also gifted and had been in the gifted program since grade one. He was going into grade five. The teacher refused to acknowledge that a child could be gifted and learning disabled. Eric had received help from the Children's Hospital...the year before, where he was

> diagnosed, given guidelines for the school, which the school refused to follow. The teacher told Eric there was no such thing as dyslexia - he just refused to deal with it.

Prior to grade five, Eric's years at school were happy and productive. He was challenged by the program, and it was not until grade four that his learning difficulties became obvious and of enough concern that his parents, through their medical doctor, had him thoroughly assessed at Children's Hospital. The assessment was completed during the summer, and shortly before school-opening in September, his mother

> went in before school and said [to the teacher] "Eric's got a learning disability problem. Here's the full report from the Children's Hospital...please look at it and try to help the kid out." He said, "A lot of gifted kids have learning disabilities - I'll handle it."

The year began well. Eric went "in anticipation of just a great year, because he knew his brother had had a great year...and

of course it was the exact opposite." Eric came home more and more unhappy with school, and it seemed apparent to his parents that there was a serious conflict between him and his teacher. They felt, too, that Eric was being unfairly treated. They never received negative reports about his behavior from the school, yet Eric complained of

> being picked on constantly...We found it strange, because Eric was the kind of kid that if you said, "Jump," he'd say, "How high?" because he loved school...we never had a problem up to this point.

Other children in the gifted class confirmed that Eric was not being treated fairly by his teacher. They were puzzled, because to them, Eric was well behaved and a good student. The teacher had said to Eric, in discussing his reading difficulties, that there was no such thing a dyslexia, and did not take steps to secure extra assistance for him. In a later interview focussing on the teacher's inaction on the Children's Hospital test results, he stated that the testing, because it was done outside the school, "was not valid. However, the teacher who did Eric's remedial at the hospital was hired by the

board of education."

During the fall term, Eric's parents began to take some preliminary steps toward ensuring that their son would receive the necessary help:

> We got in touch with the head of enrichment and said there was nothing going on. She got in touch with Children's Hospital, and was making arrangements for the teacher to come and talk to Eric's teacher...but they never got together, and then it was she could come and observe the class.

Despite their action, little or nothing seemed to be happening that would help Eric with his difficulties. Gene and Shirley Bailey were puzzled by his first report card, and their puzzlement and dissatisfaction began to take shape as a serious dispute:

> I guess the first real confrontation was with Eric's report card. By this time, we were getting a little fed up with [the teacher], so I phoned and said, "Yeah, I want an interview, but I want the vice-principal present." This was the strange part; he had very high marks in the areas where we knew he had his problems...he couldn't spell to save his life, and we know it...his writing ability is terrible.

By the time the parent-teacher conference was over, Gene and Shirley Bailey were quite sure that a large part of the problem was the teacher's apparent dislike for their son:

> So we get in there, and we try to sort out these inconsistencies, but it became more and more apparent that [the teacher] did not like the kid, and finally I said to him, "Bob, could you not at some point - the kid needs praise, not just criticism." He said to me, "There's nothing to praise him about."

Again, the parents were puzzled. Eric had received some top grades on his report card; grades that seemed to them to be inconsistent with their son's performance. Yet whether that was true or not, Eric did have some high marks. Why was there nothing to praise him about?

After the first report card and the conference, "things seemed to settle down for awhile...things seemed to go quite smooth." Before long, though, Eric began to complain about things that had happened to him at school, and

that was again confirmed by other students. He still was not getting the assistance he needed, despite the fact that the vice-principal had attended their meeting with the teacher. As far as Eric's parents were concerned, the teacher "wouldn't accept his problems."

The difficulties continued throughout the second term. A computer and tape deck that were supposed to have been provided for Eric's use were never made available. The computer was actually in the classroom, but whenever Eric asked to use it, he was told that there were others ahead of him. Gene and Shirley found it difficult to get interviews with the principal, because that work had been delegated to the vice-principal. They decided to move things a step ahead:

> After the second report...he was literally refusing to go to school, so we went down and saw [the superintendent]...he had a meeting with the principal and all the parties involved, and assured me that now everything would be done for Eric. He would get the computer, he would get the tape deck...of course, these things never appeared.

By this time, Gene and Shirley Bailey were beginning to look at the impact on their lives of what was happening at school. Shirley had taken pride in the fact that they had tried to be as objective as possible in their dealings with the school:

> Part of me was very frightened with what this was doing to Eric, the change in his personality. Part of me was totally frustrated. We felt that we had tried to be as fair and nonjudgmental as possible...My biggest concern, I think, was for Eric, because he had a lot of personality changes.

Gene's response was somewhat different:

> flabbergasted more than anything, because I never expected all this. And very angry...I knew how good it could be, and I was very angry because it was the other extreme.

In the spring, Eric had to be out of school for three days to take part in a national swim meet. During the trip, his parents discussed the school situation and their frustration with the lack of progress on obtaining

assistance for their son. They decided that they would not put Eric back in school until something was done. They did not mention anything to the school, yet "the school never phoned us to say, "Where's Eric?" And this child they knew had to take two city buses to get to school...anything could have happened."

They went to see the superintendent again and told him that there had been no results from their previous meeting with him, despite the fact that he had made it clear that he was "the boss. I tell him [the principal] to do it, and he's bloody well going to do it." After that meeting Eric had a meeting with the principal, and a few days later, Eric was designated "Student of the Month." In Gene's terms, "He was really proud...They took his picture...but his picture never did get put up."

Early in June, after another in a series of meetings held in an effort to improve Eric's school situation, the Bailey's felt pushed almost to the limit by a letter from the school board, which made Gene angry:

> I guess it was in the early part of June, saying the school does have a learning disabled program, but it's far too late in the year to enrol Eric. I almost went through the ceiling at that. Where was this program at the beginning of the year? It was there. Why wasn't Eric in it?...That really floored me, that in June they would say this program exists, but it's too late to put your son in it. We were there in August asking for it. I've framed that letter.

By this time, during one of their meetings, the vice-principal had suggested that the Baileys look for another school:

> He said, "[The teacher]'s going to be here again next year, Eric's going to be here again next year - you'd better look at alternatives...and that was his solution to the problem - move the child...It was at that point that we said, "Well, we're moving, anyways," and his eyes lit up, and he said, "Oh, good" - he was most happy with that...we did explore the alternatives of moving Eric, and then we decided it was such a short time, it wasn't worth it. In retrospect, we should have moved him...that's where we goofed.

Finally, in early June, the Baileys took matters into their own hands:

> The ultimate thing that eventually made us pull him out was when he was left at school...That was the straw that broke the camel's back. I get a phone call at work at 2:00 in the afternoon from my son, saying, "I'm at school and I can't find my class. The office won't help me." So I went over there to see what the heck was going on, and there he is standing on the street, during school hours, waiting for me to pick him up. So I took him into the school and found out what the heck was going on, and the office had no idea it was possible.
>
> He'd gone to the washroom and they'd left - headed up the street to the museum...They never did check back with the school, where's my kid. It was only a class of twelve. The principal was flabbergasted. He could not believe this could happen...
>
> Even the office staff wouldn't help the child. They just said, "Find them - look around the school and find your class." I guess they assumed they were somewhere around the school...I would support the office staff in a sense. They were doing phys ed testing all over the school - I guess they just assumed they were somewhere around the place. But you know, that really made me mad, that they would let a child wander around, outside and everything. You know, you think you're safe at school...If your imagination wants to go, anything could happen, in the city.
>
> So that night we discussed it - there was only two weeks of school left, like, it's getting near the end of school, so I said, "That's it - we're not sending him back." There's his psychological wellbeing...his physical safety is possibly in jeopardy.

The Baileys felt that they had gone about things in the proper order, without violating school protocols or placing school people in an embarrassing situation. They had tried

> at first the principal, then the vice-principal, and then the superintendent...the chairman of the board of education was the final resort...That's over a six-month period, where it escalated and everyone just kept getting involved...it just kept going up higher, through the channels, and we didn't get any more satisfaction...from December right through to June.

As they looked back from the vantage point of several months' passage of time and the other side of the country, Gene Bailey summed up their experience:

> To me it was like a year of letting your kid down, because you couldn't correct the situation, that was the hardest part. If we were to confront this problem again, we won't wait for the first report card to act. We won't worry about stepping on toes, either...He can't stand up for himself - we have to. What do you do with the kid? It's difficult - luckily we moved, and it's worked out here.

Lee Spencer: One Lost Year

Roger and Rita Spencer and their two sons Lee and Robbie had moved from Bayside to Rockforth in the early spring, although for the sake of their childrens' education, they would rather have moved in the summer. Their children had always been relatively well adjusted at school, and there had been relatively few problems. The family had lived in a comfortably affluent neighborhood, and the school had reflected that setting. Neither the parents nor their sons were prepared, though, for the changes they encountered, either in the neighborhood or at school.

In some respects, the two schools were similar, except that while the families who sent their children to the school in Bayside could be termed relatively prosperous, that was true for only some of the population at Rockforth School. Many of the children at Rockforth were bussed to school from a variety of neighborhoods. It was no a happy move. In Ruth Spencer's words,

> It became obvious very quickly that he wasn't going to fit in there. And he'd been going to a school that was, well, what the kids term preppy, most of the kids were preppy. Now all of a sudden he's in this school that has a, um, fairly transient population, and for a long time we told him, you know, "When you get out into the workforce, you'll have to get along with your workmates whether you like them or not...it'll build character blah, blah, blah." He wasn't impressed.

Lee was a competitive swimmer, a piano player, and an enthusiastic participant in whatever his school had to offer. If there was to be an air band competition, Lee signed up and went dressed for the part. That was not "cool" at Rockforth, as it turned out, and Lee soon found himself alone and the butt of jokes and epithets.

The Spencers had moved in Lee's grade eight year. Although it became obvious very early that their son was unhappy at Rockforth School, Roger and Ruth kept him there, thinking that he would soon adjust. Nothing much was

said over the summer, but it became clear in late August that Lee was not happy about returning. Early in September, Ruth asked for a transfer, but was told there was no room at the other nearby secondary school. Lee began to apply pressure to his parents. Speaking of that period, Ruth said:

> He's really hostile, he's doing what I like to call sustained nagging. Every day practically - at least three times a week - he's complaining about this school, and about how these kids are so raunchy, and how he isn't fitting in, and I think part of it was the move, but I think he just wasn't compatible with those type of kids.

Lee had stayed fairly calm at the Rockforth School, but by the middle of grade nine, both his behavior and his marks were deteriorating:

> he started to get into trouble...He's a very passive type of kid; I mean he's big, but he's very passive, and all of a sudden he's getting in fights, and he's getting suspended. His grades are not very good (lower), and it just sort of went from bad to worse.

The situation became worse when Lee came home one day and told his parents that one of his friends had been able to get a transfer to another school. In Lee's view, his own parents were not doing enough to get him moved. Roger Spencer phoned the school counsellor, who said he would meet with Lee to "talk to him and see what his problems were, and see if they could give him some hints for settling in better, which they did, but it didn't do any good."

Things went from bad to worse. When Lee continued to say that his parents weren't doing anything to help him (get him transferred), they encouraged him to see the counsellor again. They wanted him to take the initiative after they had "tried to do it unsuccessfully, to see if he can get the ball rolling himself, then he'll feel better about it." Nothing came of it, though, and Lee stayed at Rockforth for all of grade nine. Roger and Ruth were constantly confronted by their son's unhappiness:

> It wasn't really any particular incident...he had these awful report cards, and he just kept getting in trouble, and he

just kept going on and on about it.

Ruth had had enough. She felt that she was the one who had to bear the brunt of Lee's complaints:

> I was getting really frustrated, because I'm the parent that's home the majority of the time, and my husband will quite often not even see the kids in the evening, because he's a salesman, he has to work in the evening...When he was home, Lee wouldn't always think to bring it up, and he tends to nag me more than he does his father. I guess he just turns his ears off. It has more of an effect on me.

Ruth's patience began to wear thin from Lee's "sustained nagging." She felt that her son had a legitimate case, but that there was nothing else she could do to help. In frustration, she decided to shift the responsibility for action:

> Finally, at the beginning of grade ten, I was getting real sick of hearing about it, and I said to my husband, "You phone the school...So finally my husband phoned, and all of a sudden there was room. I don't know what had happened. I guess a whole lot of kids must have dropped out or something, ha ha. Suddenly there was - "Oh, no problem."

From this point on in the interview, Ruth Spencer focussed sharply on the fact that after she had tried to deal with Lee's problems for over a year, Roger had achieved an almost instantaneous solution. She was cynical about the reasons:

> The thing that irritated me, that I pointed out to the counsellor, I felt that they viewed the complaint much more seriously when it came out of a man's mouth, and the counsellor denied that when I said it at the interview.

Ruth's frustration was clearly evident during the interview. She wondered what would have happened if her personal circumstances had been different: "Actually, I think it was real unfair, because what if I was a single parent? He'd still be going to the other school." If Lee had not been transferred, Ruth thought, he "probably would end up dropping out, because he just couldn't fit in there." Ruth compared her experience to what might have happened to her in a job situation:

> From my point of view, it was as if I'd been working in an office doing the same job as a man and getting $4.00 an hour less, then all of a sudden another male comes in and they get hired at the same wage as the male that was there originally.

Whatever might have been the reasons why the Spencers' request to have Lee transferred was finally granted, he soon settled back to what they had previously known to be his behavior, achievement and attitudes: "He's been doing much better since he came hers, and he hasn't been in any more trouble, but he also knows that now if he gets into trouble he doesn't have an excuse."

Ruth Spencer had not forgotten the experience as seen through her eyes, though, and she was prepared in the event that a second round proved necessary:

> I have to go through this whole thing again next year. I have a son that will be in grade eight next year...I'm going to phone up the schools and see what happens, and if I do not get a transfer for him, then I'm going to have my husband phone up. If he phones up and there <u>is</u> a transfer available, I'm going to complain to the school board...I was really angry about it because, like, he wasted all of grade nine because they didn't want to hear a woman's voice on the other end of the phone? Because it wasn't that serious if only a mother was phoning?

The Spencers also had an alternate plan to get Lee out of the school if all of their transfer requests had failed, because in their view, the problems were too serious to overlook any longer:

> He was going nowhere in that school, and when he finished grade twelve in that school, <u>if</u> he did, he was not going to have the tools to go on to university and do what he wants to do. So it was not only going to ruin his schooling, it was probably going to make serious dents in his post-secondary education, and possibly the rest of his life.

They discussed their alternatives, and finally decided that if they did not accomplish what they had set out to do, dishonesty was the best policy: "We were going to say that he lives at my brother's house, because my brother lives in this district, so we would have lied [laughs]."

> I think as parents, most parents go through a lot of inner turmoil, thinking, "Is it my child?" This is what was our turmoil. We knew he wasn't a perfect kid, we knew he had a temper problem, and that kind of stuff. But we also knew it had to go, it was a little deeper than that...I said (to B_____), "I'm the mother. People do know their children, and...I've never painted a rosy picture of my child to you, and I never said it was never his fault, but I felt you are acting, B_____, as if it's all his fault and you guys have no responsibility, you don't play a part in it."

They were parents who admitted that their child had problems - problems learning and problems with his behavior. It had been a long history as far as the learning problems were concerned; almost since Dallas had begun school. George Waterman, his father, called it a "motor vision problem." Whatever it was George and Elaine had done their best to help their son. They were encouraged in their efforts by the principal of Walnut Park Elementary School:

> Being the parents that we are, and knowing about Dallas' problems, we were at the school just about every day, helping him, trying to find ways to help him, and Mr. Eby being the principal that he was, understanding this, really helped us an awful lot...he was someone you could sit down and talk to.

When Dallas' learning difficulties persisted into grade three and the remedial program was not helping much, his capabilities were assessed carefully. The result was a referral to a regional special education centre, where Dallas went four days a week, returning to his regular class on Fridays.

Understandably, some behavior problems began to develop. By the end of grade three, Dallas was a year older than the other students. In his mother's view, "Because Dallas has a learning disability, he feels bad about himself - his self-esteem is poor." His parents had an agreement with the teacher, though, that "if he stepped out of line," the teacher should "get on the phone and phone us, or if there ever was a problem, don't hesitate, let us know."

At the beginning of Dallas' grade four year, things began to change. Mr. Eby retired, and Frank Barker became the principal. George Waterman saw Barker as "very cold, very calculating. He shook the whole school...got rid

of just about all the staff and brought in new staff." The Watermans continued their efforts to help Dallas and to get to the bottom of his behavior problems, although they were unhappy with what they saw as Frank Barker's response:

> Every time we had problems, I would go to the school...we would have a discussion, and every time...he would, "Oh, Yeah, I'll look after it," and everything, and he would ignore us."

George Waterman had other disagreements with Frank Barker. George was a cook in a restaurant at one point, and objected strongly to one of Barker's practices, although he was never able to do anything about it:

> Mr. Barker would have kids pick up garbage with bare hands, and father objected - health hazard, etc. "At that point I was working in a restaurant, and it just infuriated me...I never got that one solved. He felt he was the principal and there wasn't a damn thing I could do about it."

Unlike other interviewees, most of whom related their stories in quite chronological order, Mr. and Mrs. Waterman moved back and forth in their account. They were clear, though, on the events of Dallas' grade four year. What greeted George on his return from working out of town on one occasion was typical of other occurrences:

> The fourth year started off with a bang. This teacher started right off giving Dallas a hard time...not just Dallas, there was some other kids, too. Dallas came home, just, he was devastated, and I said to him, "What's wrong? (The teacher) would call him stupid, he would make derogatory remarks, "You're gonna fail," This was just a few days into school, he told him point-blank he was going to fail. He would constantly be belligerent to him. I was away, and I came home, and my wife told me all this. Then I get a call from Mr. Barker, "Dallas has taken off from school." I found him and came home, and I said to him, "OK, what's going on." And I wasn't in a very good mood. I had been up for over three days straight then, and I walk into this mess - it just made me angry.

Elaine wanted to be sure that what she was hearing from Dallas was correct. One of the main problems, according to Dallas, was the teacher's practice of berating the students. Elaine's strategy was unorthodox and

perhaps contributed to the problems the Watermans were having in their relationship with the school:

> I would come to school early, and I know they discourage this, but I feel that parents should have a right to come, and if the door's open, listen for a few minutes. I found this man not a very nice man to his kids. If I heard this, what was the principal hearing? And why did the principal overlook this?

Periodically during the interview, one or the other of the parents would allude to the fact that at various times, there had been problems in the home. Throughout the interview, Dallas' father was strong in his criticism of the school's practices and also in his descriptions of his own assertiveness. Elaine described one incident that had particularly offended Dallas:

> Mr. Barker had it classed like there was problems in the home, and there were...but I felt like he felt it was all our problem, and he didn't have a part to play in it...after Christmas (the teacher) made (him and a girl) write a test, and Dallas got a B, and he told Dallas, "You cheated, I'm not giving it to you," ...that there was no way he could have obtained that mark, and turned around and ripped it up, and made them rewrite the test. Well, that infuriated Dallas, and he just threw his hands up, and he said, "Well, what the hell's the use?

George had just returned from a trip.. He was incensed at the allegation that his son had cheated:

> I was very angry...I went to the school, and Mr. Barker saw me coming, and he went into the staffroom, and I looked at Dallas and I said, "You get into that room, get all your stuff out, and ...put it in the car...when it's there, you wait for me there."

George went on to indicate that he had threatened the teacher with a lawsuit over the allegation that his son had cheated. The matter was never resolved. From the discussion, it appeared that the teacher had had the students rewrite the test. The girl scored a similar mark to her first test, but Dallas, as George noted, did not try to rewrite.

Dallas never returned to Walnut Park School. His parents' first effort at transfer, though, was not successful. They pursued the matter beyond the school and achieved their goal..lsl

So we took him out of the school, and then we came here, because we had heard a lot of good reports...Then I went to Mr. Henderson and we were told we could not put Dallas into this school...because...that would go against another principal, he would not play games with another principal, which we can understand.

I phoned [the Assistant Superintendent]...and at that point he knew he had a couple of angry parents on his hands, and he said, "Leave it with me for a day - I'll get back to you."...One day or two days, he had it arranged, and we brought Dallas in.

Elaine Waterman was reflective and apparently realistic about her son's limitations and difficulties:

You have to realize, too, that Dallas was...two years older than the other students, so Mr. Barker kept telling Dallas, too, "You have to set an example for the kids, but Dallas was two years older in age, but not mentality-wise, and I think that was to help Dallas take a dislike to Mr. Barker,...Every time there was trouble in the school yard, Dallas got singled out, because he either was near, or was in part (to blame)...but it seemed like Dallas got the punishment, but the other kids didn't get the punishment, because they said that Dallas was the ringleader.

Elaine's point throughout the interview, supported by her husband, was that from the start they had recognized Dallas' learning difficulties and the related problems which were occurring throughout their son's elementary school years. She pointed to Dallas' relatively problem-free life in his new school as evidence that part of the responsibility for Dallas' earlier difficulties rested with Walnut Grove School. She defended the family's approach as part of their persistent concern for Dallas

I could see it if we didn't care about the kids, shipped them off to school and never went to the parent-teacher meetings, never went to the classes, never went to talk to the principal to find out how the child was doing.

> It's hard, it's really hard, because you're dealing with someone's future. They had me in tears at the school, you know. I could hardly contain myself. It sounded like a terminal illness, when they said he had a learning disability. I said to my husband, "What are we doing to do? Does this mean he's going to spend the rest of his life like this? What does it mean?" I mean, there was never any explanation. I knew what the capabilities of this child were around the home, so I couldn't put the two together.

Almost from the beginning of Jimmy's school life, Betty Hill had realized that her son was having difficulties: "At about grade two, I noticed that he wasn't grasping things." She contacted the teacher, who at first was reassuring, suggesting that some children take a little longer than others to get started. When the problems persisted and it became clear that there was more than a developmental lag, the teacher agreed to refer Jimmy for assessment, saying, "Well, we'll put him through some tests, but that takes a long time."

"A long time" turned out to be about a year. Jimmy was not tested until almost the end of grade three. By this time he had spent a year with another teacher, one who, according to Jimmy's mother, was less understanding of his difficulties. Becky Hill could see changes in Jimmy:

> When we went through the tests, by that time so much damage had been done, it was unbelievable. He was so negative, he didn't feel good about himself, he was - it seemed like he was trying to get attention all the time, and he would come home from school and tell me that he had been stuck in a little room at the back of the classroom...He wouldn't get notices, and I would say, "Well, why not?" And he would say, "Well, I'm at the back of the class, and if they run out, I don't get one.

Jimmy's grade four year was the hardest for Becky. She did not want to be what she called a "butting in parent." She felt that the teachers were professional, that they were doing their jobs, and that hopefully, things would work out well in the end. Increasingly, though, she felt that "It seemed like Jimmy was being kind of pushed out of the scene." Although she had concerns about interfering with the school's plans, "The negativism from

him was so great, I decided to find out what was going on."

The word from the school, based on the results of the testing, was that "Jimmy was a visual learner, not an audio learner." He had difficulty learning unless he could see the material. But according to Becky,

> The teacher was an audio teacher, and therefore he mistook Jimmy for being very tardy, not doing his work, and he had never been, you know, a bad child. He didn't understand, because he wasn't seeing it on paper, and therefore, by the time that he went through grade four, and his marks were worse and worse and worse.

Becky stayed in touch with the school, trying to ensure that Jimmy got the help she thought he needed. In fact, he was getting as much as the school could give:

> Subsequently they pulled me into the school, and he had gotten learning assistance, he had at that point three teachers that were helping him. You know, tutoring and learning assistance, etc. etc. I mean, I'm not going against the school, they gave him all the help that he could have used.

Jimmy had difficulty handling the pressure of conflicting demands from all of the various school people who, in his mother's view, were doing their best:

> It was too much; it was just all at once, and he told me one day, he said, "You know, I feel like a computer." He said, "I feel like I'm overloaded," and he just pulled out right there and decided not to do anything.
>
> Becky respected Jimmy's teachers. She was also anxious for Jimmy to succeed, and was pleased when the principal called her to come to the school for a meeting to discuss Jimmy's progress. She was frustrated and disappointed after the meeting:
>
> when they called me into the school, they had told me that basically, he wasn't doing well, they had given him all the help that they could, and that he had a, quote, "learning disability."
>
> I said, "But, what's a learning disability?" "Well, some kids don't learn as quickly as others." "But what is a learning disability?" Well, nobody could really define a learning disability.

Becky's question, "What's a learning disability?" came up repeatedly throughout the interview. She had frequently raised the question with Jimmy's teachers, and in the absence of firm answers, tried to match what the teachers

told her with what she knew of her son:

> I felt that if they didn't fit into a category, they had a learning disability, ok? But at the same time, this same child, I know, he had a great memory at home - he could sit down, we had a video game attached to the tv, he could watch both and understand what was going on in both, and video games, as you know, you have to have very good reflexes, plus he could watch tv, plus, I know he could sit down with his Dad and play chess, which, you know, requires a lot of concentration. So I couldn't understand. I said to them, "Well, does this mean he's going to be doing license plates the rest of his life?" And they said, "No, but he has a learning disability, and he may not reach full potential." Nobody ever told me what a learning disability was. Like, "How long does he have?" (laughs)

While he was still in grade four, Jimmy began to attend the district's Prescriptive Learning Centre. Becky described it as "more of a one on one...they taught him organizational methods and to finish something." She was delighted with both his progress and the change in his attitudes.

At the end of grade four, the teachers at the PLC suggested that Jimmy not go back to the same school. Becky could see no need for a change, particularly because of the improvement she could see in Jimmy's self-image. She sent her son back to his original school, but later regretted her decision:

> He came back from the PLC. They had suggested that he not go back to the same school... Why not, he's been going here since he's been little? He had been basically in the school since grade two, and he had a short term out of it, because we had to move to a new district. But when he came back...he got labeled - "dummy," "stupid," "you're a retard." This was from the kids. So then his self esteem, which he had built up a little bit came back down again.

At the end of the year, Jimmy was reassigned to grade five, and his problems continued. Shortly before the end of the school year, his parents received a brochure in the mail from a private school. They thought, "Maybe he needs the discipline," and decided to send him there.

To their delight, they found that the vice-principal from Jimmy's first school was going to be the assistant headmaster at the private school. In

their view, this man was "just super, I mean, the best." He had known Jimmy since grade two, and when he met with the Hills, he said, "You know, I'm going to turn this kid around," and he "took him under his wing." Becky's assessment of Jimmy's progress during his second year in grade five was extremely positive:

> Well, they brought up his self-esteem so much in one year, it was unbelievable. They told him they believed in him, they told him that he could do it, they told him that , you know, they told him that if he applied himself he could do it, and they were always on him, all the time - do you have your homework done?
>
> In grade four, he barely knew his times tables. By almost the end of grade six at this school, he had entered the provincials for math. He was on the team, he was getting very good with mental mathematics, whatever they call that.
>
> So anyhow, he was really, really good, and even at "graduation," you know, he got awards, he'd done a poster for Block Parents, they had accepted him...

The Hills were in business for themselves, running two stores in separate parts of the community. After a year of driving, and the sale of their house which had been on the market for several months, they could not maintain the schedule. Jimmy had made great strides, but his neighbourhood friendships were suffering. Mary outlined the events that led to their decision:

> Anyway, because we have two businesses, that was two hours out of our day that we had to drive out and back, and it was very, very difficult...you're looking at half an hour there, half an hour back, twice. Sometimes we could send our drivers and pick him up, which was easy, and sometimes we could get a teacher to drop him off, but in the end, the teacher couldn't do it, so it made it very difficult, and besides that...our house had been sold, and we moved now into another district (we're still in the same school district), so he could not go back to the same school.
>
> What had happened was, because so much time had been spent travelling to and from school, he would leave at 7:00 in the morning, wouldn't get back until 5:30 at night...most kids are fed, they've played, and they're in for the night. He had no social life, as far as the children around him. So then we brought him back to a public school system, and we said, "Well, let's see what's going to happen now.

Because of the family move, Jimmy was enrolled in a different public school, one he had not previously attended. His year at the private school

and the support provided throughout grade six preceded a final elementary school year which in Becky's view was a great success:

> He's in grade seven now. The first term he got five B's and 5 C's. The second term he's got B's and C's, he got one D in French, A, although it's not an important thing, um, in Art - but it was the first A he ever got. Now he feels good that he can get an A...He doesn't study, and he's getting B's and C's, so I know that if he were really to apply himself, he' probably be an A student.

Looking back, Becky felt that Jimmy's problems had become severe in grade four. She said of his teacher for that year, "I feel that he really, really took away his self-esteem." She found out from talking to other parents that her son was not the only one "that ever got treated like that." She was more positive about the school generally, at least in terms of their efforts to help Jimmy, but felt that they should have looked more closely at what was happening in the classroom:

> They gave him as much help as they possibly could, but they didn't look at the fact of what the teacher was doing...He didn't fit into the slot, so he was kind of pushed aside. He was a round peg in a square hole.

Becky's brother Sam had left school very early and worked at a variety of unskilled jobs over a ten or fifteen year period. He had enrolled in a college for upgrading at one point, but did not have the study skills he needed to complete his secondary school graduation program. Becky thought about Sam more than once as she tried to ensure that Jimmy would succeed:

> It was frustrating, as a parent, because...I look at my brother...he can't keep a job, he can't go any further, and he's too old now, he's embarrassed to go back and get an education. I don't want that to happen to my son.

Kent Stanton: Tell Us Straight

> If only they had been honest, if only they had told us they were testing him, then we could have carried it further in grade one, when it first started...instead of just hoping the problem would go away.

Garth and Rosemary Stanton had discussed whether or not they should send Kent to kindergarten when he was five. His mother in particular had "thought he was a little immature at that time," but they decided that "going to school would help him develop." They were not disappointed. In Rosemary's words, "Kindergarten was an exemplary year. He had a great time...he thought about losing his kindergarten teacher, and he didn't want to." Grade one, though, was a different story:

> When he got to grade one, problems started to surface, such as confrontations with the teacher, conflicts in his understanding of what the teacher wanted him to do, conflicts with the children, mainly conflicts with the children...When I questioned her or asked her about it, it was, "Oh, he's just having problems settling in. He's a little slower than some of the other kids, but that's ok, because we're gonna work on it," and, um, it was more or less evasions, there were never any direct answers. If I asked her a direct question, I wasn't given a direct answer...I would say, "Can you specifically tell me an instance of what's going on, or how to correct it, or to verify what you're doing at school with what's going on at home." I didn't get any answers, I got evasions.

The theme of evasiveness was to recur throughout the interview with the Stantons. After several meetings with the grade one teacher, they met with the vice-principal, who asked the teacher to keep a record of incidents involving Kurt and then get in touch with his parents. According to them, "That never occurred."

When Kent moved into grade two, his parents discovered and dealt with some food allergies that their son had. During the early part of that year,

> things seemed to settle down, and I thought, "Hey, maybe it really <u>was</u> the food. For the first two months in grade two, everything was going really well, but after that, everything started to escalate again...

During Kent's grade three year, the Stantons began to realize that their son's learning difficulties may be more serious than they had thought. In reading, he was "away below the other group - he was in remedial reading." It was during this year that they discovered Kent had been specially tested during grade one. Rosemary was surprised that she had not known about this, because "I was very involved in his grade one situation." The Stantons later found out that Kent had been further tested in grade two. That fact came out during meetings which left Garth feeling that

> They were starting to signify him then as being a socially maladjusted child, or a social development problem...and they wanted him to be in a special adjustment program. Then I find out as well that during grade two he'd been tested again, that I had no idea of.
>
> You know, like, everybody's starting to label Kent, and they want to get rid of Kent. My thinking is, and I'm telling my wife that from the way they're acting, the way they're responding, and the things that they are <u>not</u> saying, um, they're heading in this direction.
>
> I told my wife, I said, "I can see this plain and simple. They want the kid out of the school. They don't want to deal with the kid - they just want him gone."

Garth's view was strengthened when he found out that, again without the parents' knowledge, the grade three teacher had arranged for Kent to be assessed by one of her colleagues who had worked in the district's social skills program. By now, the lack of communication on both sides was leading to further difficulties.

Frustrated, the Stantons had arranged for Kent to be assessed by a psychologist in private practice who also handled referrals from the school district. Around that time, there was a major confrontation between Kent and his teacher:

> she grabbed him one day, and he just kept telling her, let him go, let him go. When she grabbed him, the more she grabbed, the more he yelled, and she came off there like, "Oh, I'm really terrified of this kid - he needs to be recommended for social skills...I sat back, and I said, "I can't believe this...you're a person who has worked with social skills kids, and you're trying to say this is

> the worst thing you have ever seen." ...We saw the kids that were in the class, and Kent don't even measure up to those kids...And then I started to doubt everything that she had to say. I just didn't feel that she was competent enough to make the statements.

Rosemary Stanton described the scene at home about that time: "The anguish and the anxiety and the stress on his little face when he walked through the door, that's when I said, we've got to get him out of there." The Stantons attended one more meeting of the instructional team at the school. They described a situation where people came to the meeting late, and one left for a time, then came back and rejoined the conversation:

> You can't leave a meeting, come back in - you don't even know where the conversation's gone - and jump right in and say, "Yeah, I agree." I found it to be offensive; I found it to be downright disrespectful.

Rosemary contrasted that meeting with the next one, which was a school district placement meeting:

> But when we went to the placement meeting, it was like walking from night to day. The women that you dealt with at that meeting were very professional, and they knew what they were speaking about. To go from people who gave you evasive answers, these were people who answered you straight out, asked you a straight out question and got to the heart of the problem. That was at the school board.

The outcome of that meeting was a decision to place Kent at Highbury Elementary School. Kent, who had been the centre of discussion for the previous two or three years, wanted to know the outcome of the meeting immediately. His parents told him the news, and his relief was immediate. Rosemary described the transition:

> He would be sleepwalking, he would be talking in his sleep...it was conflict...he would always wake up saying, "I can't, I can't." Since the day he started here we have not had one incident...The day he left that school the nightmares stopped. And it wasn't even the day he left. They started to subside the day we let him know he would be leaving.

The most significant factor in Kent's eyes was his new teacher:

> Listen, my teacher always told me that I was wasting her time, and for me to go away and sit down and do it on my own...my

teacher doesn't tell me that now...he helps me, he doesn't make me feel like I'm stupid.

Looking at the bigger picture, his parents commented that

> They have a program that basically deals with all the needs. Mr. Sawyer has six who are obviously learning disability in the class and he doesn't seem to mind. He seems to welcome it. They have a lady who was highly recommended to us by the school board who is kind of like J____'s learning assistance teacher...and I think the structure of the school here itself. The teachers her obviously care about the kids. The teachers are here early, they let them in early, they let them do their work...There they couldn't come inside until school was on. The people...seem to be aware that there are learning disabilities.

Rosemary and Garth had taken Kent to Highbury before the date he was to move, to remove some of the unknowns and uncertainties of changing to a different school. Garth noticed immediately that there was a more relaxed atmosphere at the new school: "At this school they allow the kids to come in...prior to the start of class, and at that school, if you went there early, you sat outside." Rosemary felt that the new setting was particularly suitable for her son:

> I think the whole thing is that it's a relaxed atmosphere that allows kids to be kids...of course they have to be disciplined, but there's a relaxed atmosphere that allows kids to be creative, allows them to learn, allows them to explore, without being nervous about being different...Kent has always felt different, he's always felt that that difference has been like an albatross for him to carry around his neck.

Looking back, the Stantons' strongest memory was of struggling for specifics, for "an opinion other than a smooth official opinion." Rosemary said, "I can't help Kent if I don't have something tangible, something direct that I can see." The vagueness, they were convinced, was directly related to the school's desire to have Kent moved elsewhere. On their part,

> Neither of us were about to let go of what we knew to be true, and they weren't about to see what we were seeing, and they weren't about to see the importance of what we were saying...As much as we reached out to say, "Tell," there was nobody there telling...very many times we felt like we were stranded, you know, us against them.

Steven Bullen: Left by the Wayside

> We kind of supported the teacher, because you don't want to always take the child's side, because then they'll run over the teacher, sort of, but we didn't really understand what was going on...

Steven Bullen was an achiever - not an overachiever, but a boy who always did his best. For Steven, his best extended beyond his school subjects to sports. He was an avid swimmer and basketball player who practiced both sports three times a week; swimming all year, basketball during the season.

At the beginning of Steven's grade six year, his parents went to meet his teacher. They were pleased with their early contact:

> We talked to the teacher at the beginning of the year. I thought we had something established as far as communication was concerned, a bit of give and take her...maybe we could work together, and it seemed to be working for a little while, by his marks.

Steven's first report card, according to his parents,was "fine." Later, they would find out that his second report card was also "fine." But during the year, other aspects of Steven's school life began to slip. That extended to home, and it became more acute toward the end of the year:

> The last two months he was having a lot of problems at home. Now I don't know whether it stemmed from the home environment, or school, or whatever. When I look back on it now, I think a lot of it had to do with the stress he was under the last few months at school.

The year was a gradual awakening for Steven's parents. There were small clues from time to time that something might have been amiss, but nothing specific. Anthony thought about it at the time: "I could see a few problems with the other kids. Academically, with the teacher, we didn't see any problems there. He had good grades, but not enough homework." When they asked Steven's teacher about homework, because Steven had missed an assignment, his response was, "I'm not writing homework notes anymore. If these guys aren't old enough to look after themselves, then that's too bad."

Later in the year, after a relatively minor incident involving Steven,

the teacher suggested that "he might be better off with some other teacher, that they didn't get along." Things were going from bad to worse for Steven. Even Anthony, who acknowledged early that his son was not perfect, noted that

> The poor little guy was getting it from both ends. He was having problems with the teacher, with his subjects, and problems with other kids - he got in a few fights.

They tried to talk to Steven about it, but "he just sort of closed right up. We couldn't get anything out of him. He just said, "I don't want to talk about it." He just wanted the year to get over with."

The majority of Steven's problems, as far as his parents were concerned,

> did occur in the last term. The last few months there was no communication...Normally, if there was any problem the school has, we get a note or maybe a phone call from the teacher, and nothing was ongoing that way...One time I did specifically ask the teacher how it was going, and he said, "Oh, it's fine, fine," so I thought, I guess it is, judging by the marks he had in the previous term.

The Bullens were perplexed by the teacher's apparent dislike for Steven, yet at the same time his insistence that all was well. According to Anthony, there were

> no other things I could pick up on. There's no communication there, no notes coming from the teacher, no phone calls. The few times I asked the teacher how he was doing, he said, "Oh, fine."

The Bullens did not involve the principal, because they felt that the teacher would have a better handle on what was going on." Toward the end of the year, though, it became obvious to Steven's parents that there were serious problems. Steven came home early one day, saying he was sick. A short while later the teacher phoned to see if Steven had arrived home, found out that he had, and ended the conversation. The Bullens assumed that he had called because Steven had gone home sick, and thought nothing more of it. They found out later that there had been a conflict between Steven and the teacher, and were perplexed because "The teacher did not identify that there

was a conflict...I think he should have told me...we never had a discussion about it."

Throughout all of this, the Bullens had not been able to get any clear indication that there were specific problems with Steven. The only comments from the teacher, they said, were those documented above. In May and June the situation deteriorated badly, but the Bullens were still hopeful as well as unsure of the reasons:

> He was an emotional wreck the last two months...I thought maybe...He practices basketball three times a week, and swims. I thought maybe he was getting overtired, and I said that maybe we'd better cut back on the swimming program, and he really got upset with that...I thought, we'll just suffer through this. I thought maybe it was some sort of phase, or...

Steven's reaction to his parents' assessment of the situation was strong and clear:

> [Steven] felt that we weren't, that we abandoned him, like, that we were not supporting him, that we were taking someone else's point of view and not giving him the support that he needed...I was telling him to just try and get along, and give in to what he wants you to do.

Just before the end of June, Steven came home very upset. According to his father, "He said, "I have to tell you this, I'm worried sick." He was throwing up, and he said he was going to fail." Steven said that the teacher had called him up to his desk on another matter. While he was there, he saw that his final report card was open on the teacher's desk, with all of Steven's final (and very low) marks entered. Steven felt that it had been done deliberately.

Anthony immediately told Steven that he would go to the school and see what the problem was, especially since the two previous report cards had been quite good. He saw the principal, who said, "I know the teacher was a bit disappointed, because his marks have dropped a bit, but I can assure you that he isn't failing. He's going to pass this year."

Anthony waited for the final report, and was taken aback when he saw it:

> When we saw the final marks, that was a bit of a shock. We decided to go talk to the teacher. And basically what he said to us, after half an hour...he basically said, well, your son was involved with three or four other kids, they were constantly disrupting the class, and with the other kids he has, he really couldn't take the time away from the rest of them...Basically he said he gave up on him, which really surprised me - it ticked me off.

Upset with this meeting, Anthony had another meeting with the principal, this time taking Steven with him. The principal could see how upset both were and, Anthony said, "I'll give him credit, he really tried to solve it." Anthony was less impressed with the principal's acceptance of one possible solution: "Maybe you're right, maybe he should start off in another school." He apologized for the fact that "some teachers are not that diplomatic, and later offered to try and talk Steven into staying at the school.

Looking back, Nancy and Anthony reflected on the fact that Steven "was having difficulty everywhere he went, and he was really getting depressed, because then we were coming down on him too. We were on his case for everything."

The Bullens decided to move Steven to another school. They talked with the principal of a school that Steven had attended previously, kept in touch with him over the summer, and made the move in September. Steven had not failed his grade, and although he recognized that he would need learning assistance, he set his goal clearly: "I'll be out of there by Christmas" - and he was.

By the end of his first term in the new school, Steven's marks had improved to their previous level. His parents were relieved, and at the same time, they were clear on what they would expect from his teachers from that point on. His father expressed it, "You can't just leave children by the wayside. You have to get hold of their parents and straighten it out."

Fiona MacDonald: No English, Please

> It was like seeing the light. I woke up one morning and said, "I don't have to put up with this. I can send her to Fullerton School". I phoned a friend and said, "You know what? I've got a solution!" And it was all done in two days.

Heather and Bill MacDonald had emigrated to Canada from Scotland when Fiona was nine. Fiona was placed in grade four in Queen's Park, an elementary school in a comfortable bedroom community of a nearby large city. Fiona's adjustment to her new circumstances was relatively easy, but for her parents, it was a different story.

Shortly after their arrival in Canada, the Macdonalds separated. By the time of the interview with Heather MacDonald, when Fiona was in grade seven, the marriage was clearly over, although the relationship between Heather and Bill was generally amicable. In grade six, Heather enrolled Fiona in a French immersion program. Both mother and daughter were happy with the decision, even when a mid-year move meant a change of school and school district.

The situation at Creekside, Fiona's new school, was different, at least for Fiona. Almost immediately, her Scottish accent became a source of conflict with the teacher and with Fiona's fellow students. Fiona was sensitive to what she saw as constant correction of her accent when she was speaking French.

Heather MacDonald described two situations which had escalated the conflict between home and school. The first arose as a result of Fiona and some other students lapsing into English during the school day. Their punishment was to write the sentence "I must not speak English in class" some 200 to 400 times. This situation continued into grade six with Fiona's new teacher. On one occasion, Heather said, Fiona spent eight hours on a weekend "writing out bloody lines." Her mother's position was that the punishment was both inappropriate and unfair.

The second situation occurred when Fiona came home one afternoon and told her mother that the teacher had held one of Fiona's notebooks up in front of the class to point out an error. Fiona came home crying, feeling that she had been ridiculed in front of her classmates, and told her mother that she was afraid to go back to school.

Heather MacDonald went to the school immediately, and straight to Fiona's classroom. She knocked; the teacher opened the door, recognized her, stepped out into the hall and closed the door on several students who were in the classroom. According to Heather MacDonald, the two had a heated conversation in which Heather accused the teacher of ridiculing Fiona in front of the class.

At this point, Fiona's mother said, the teacher opened the classroom door, leaned in, and said to the students, "Did Fiona seem ridiculed to you today?" At this, the conversation was over. Heather MacDonald went straight down the hall to the principal's office. She said that she related her story to the principal who, though "cap in hand," offered no sympathy. Instead, Heather stated, she said, "Well, you know, Fiona really shouldn't be in grade six anyway, and asked, "You seem upset. Are there troubles at home?"

Now the second conversation was over. It ended with Mrs. MacDonald saying, "I'm getting nowhere with you," and telling the principal that she was "going to phone the school board." She made an appointment for the next day to see the Assistant Superintendent, who told her that "because I had said I was going to phone the school board, [the principal] had phoned first." The Assistant Superintendent also "had a letter [from the school] that had been typed up quite quickly, about me going into the classroom and shouting." Attached to the letter was a list of the names of several student "witnesses" - the students who were in the classroom when Mrs. MacDonald had gone to the school the day before.

The matter was aired as a complaint, it was almost year-end, and no further action was taken. As a footnote to her earlier comment about the writing of lines, Fiona's mother noted that "One of the kiddies in the class told her mother what went on," that the teacher had become aware of this, and that further lines were assigned.

Fiona moved into grade seven preceded, apparently, by communication from Creekside School. Early in the year, Fiona's teacher, Mr. Turner, said to her that "he knew all about her, and that she wasn't to cause any trouble."

Trouble, it seemed, was coming from all quarters. Although this was a French immersion class, the rules on the use of English were not as rigidly enforced as they had been in the past. Students would frequently ask Mr. Turner how to spell words in English, and according to Fiona, he would oblige.

Heather MacDonald became concerned when Fiona told her that the students would ask Mr. Turner how to spell words describing various bodily functions and sexual activities. In her terms,

> the kids were asking him how to spell dirty words (in English), and he would do it. He didn't make any comments, he just spelled the words. He said, "It's important they know how to spell those words."

At one point during the year, items were apparently disappearing from the classroom and the teacher's desk. Mr. Turner said, "I have a pretty good idea who's doing it," and offered a $50 reward. He also told the students that they should not mention this to their parents. For whatever reason, Fiona fe't that the finger of accusation was pointed at her.

Problems continued, and Heather MacDonald's advice to Fiona was "Just buckle under, do what they want, don't talk English, don't give them any trouble." Soon, Heather had to rely on information from another parent, the mother of Fiona's friend Noreen:

> We would find out about each child from the other one without letting either of them know. That's the only way I could keep up with what was going on, because I got nothing from the teacher. All those things that went on in the classroom were confirmed by Noreen.

Despite more visits to the principal and the Assistant Superintendent, Fiona's mother felt that she was getting nowhere in what she described as "like going through a maze - there were barriers up all the time." It was at this point that Heather MacDonald began to count the cost of keeping her daughter in the French immersion program. She felt that regardless of who was to blame, she was getting no closer to a resolution of the conflict. Finally, having concluded that it was not worth the effort or the stress that was always present, she went to see the principal at Fullerton School to see if Fiona could transfer. She didn't tell her daughter that she had gone, but

> I said to her, We're fighting a losing battle here, but you've got to finish the year." I just wanted to cut my losses. I said, she doesn't have to go through this anymore. I can send her to Fullerton. I felt like I was giving in, in a sense, but I don't think any child would benefit at all...I advised her just to go in and don't do a thing out of line.

Fiona cried bitterly during this conversation. She said, "I <u>don't</u> do anything out of line." In the child's view, her mother doubted her word and was taking the teacher's side. It was just after this that the eight-hour marathon assignment of lines occurred. That was the deciding incident for Heather. She went back to see the principal at Fullerton, told him the time had come, and arranged an immediate transfer for Fiona. Looking back, Heather MacDonald said,

> It was a miserable experience for her. Now she's on the volleyball team and she thinks it's great here. What makes me very smug is the reports she's now getting and the letter from Mrs. Henson [new teacher] saying how well she's doing.

Anthony Conwell: Round Peg, Square Hole

> I think they should pay more attention to what we as parents have to say. We needed first of all to sell ourselves, and that would take, you know, a whole year...It just took too long...
>
> We don't fault the teachers. We think the teachers are good, that they've tried...The teachers are a good group of people, and they've got a tough job, so you can't fault them. But the system didn't allow for the kind of flexibility that's needed.
>
> He's had all kinds of tests. They never could put him into that little square hole, though.

Anthony Conwell had never quite made it in school. In his parents' eyes, though, he was growing up exactly as they had wished - questioning every expectation, challenging authority until he was satisfied that the expectations were reasonable and the authority was legitimate. His parents said that they had raised their children to "always ask why" and to press for answers until they saw reasons that made sense to them. They had a clearly developed philosophy of child raising and family relationships:

> We have three children, and we've brought them up always to be independent...We taught them to question, to question us about what we're asking them. If we can't give them a good reason, we'll change it.

Although Anthony's teachers were not interviewed, they may have seen him differently. Asked when the conflicts between Anthony and the school system began, his mother said,

> Probably kindergarten - right from the very beginning...He was always a very unique type of person. You know, he always has to do everything his own way. For instance, if the teacher gave him three circles to draw, and told him to color it red, and three trees, and told him to color it green, he would color the little circles green and the trees red. That was just his nature, to do things his way.
>
> He always needed reasons for everything. He was just that type of kid. Rather than look at that and ask themselves why he would do such things, they would assume that he was being a smart ass - that's probably the basis of it.

Even within his family, though, Anthony was a special case. His parents recognized that as they talked about his difficulties in the schools he had attended:

> Anthony was a special situation. He took it one step further. You know, his sense of independence. He's going his own way. I think he would be the kind of kid who would have been thrown out of school long ago if he hadn't had help or support...It took maybe a year to realize, at every school he went to, that it wasn't because he was being mouthy or...rebellious deliberately. All he really wanted to know was why - and we agreed with him.

Compulsory physical education provided an example of Anthony's demand for answers that made sense to him. He was very active in a variety of outdoor activities that he enjoyed outside of school, spending some of his weekends hiking and mountain climbing. Given these independent outside interests, he could not see the point of organized physical education classes:

> So he would do everything he could not to take p.e. - forget his gym strip, hurt his leg - you know, whatever it took, he would find a reason...When we finally found a good reason for him,then he was fine, then he would take p.e. It just took a little more patience on the part of the teachers to realize this, and once they realized it, they had no more problems...a model student; he was doing very well.

The Conwells' differences with the education system related not only to Anthony's independence and later open rebellion, but also to his special educational needs. In his mother's words,

> The conflict arises with the standardization that there is in the school, and with someone who doesn't fit the norms. It immediately creates the conflict...You have to give him that extra time. We were never able to get that through completely...He's slow to grasp the basics. He takes two to three years, then he grasps it. A year or so ago he couldn't read very well at all, now he reads books constantly.

As a result of family moves and placement in special programs, Anthony attended several schools during his elementary years. With each move, as noted above, the Conwells found themselves once again trying to establish a productive working relationship with teachers and school administrators, a process which, understandably, took some time.

"Then he moved into secondary school and it started all over again." At this point, Anthony's difficulties with conforming to the school's

expectations became complicated by his relationships with other students:

> then he did rebel for a while. For instance in high school because he was different, and then he was treated differently, then he fought back, he got into fights...Many times he has wanted to quit.

Even though he had reached secondary school, Anthony's moves were not over. There were to be at least two more changes of school; the first because of his special needs and the second because he was unable to cope in the regular school:

> Then he changed secondary schools because they had a special program for him over at Fleming, and then he ran into a personality problem, a real big personality problem in the form of the principal. That was very difficult; for the principal, too, because he was a busy man, but that's when he started getting into fights. We got the impression that they were trying to push him out of the school..."Our school, hey, we're tough. You conform or else you're out." And we fought to keep him in the school, we did keep him in the school.

Toward the end of grade nine, the principal indicated clearly that Anthony's difficulties had narrowed the family's options considerably. Project GAIN, the school district's alternative program, was identified as an appropriate placement for Anthony. It became clear that continuing at Westridge was no longer an option:

> We had no other choices. It was either that or take him out of school, because they wouldn't have him back the next year. If we could have afforded it, we would have put him in a private school.

The Conwells continued to resist, because they felt that GAIN was not a suitable place for Anthony:

> In fact, we had strong objections to him going to GAIN, because of the background of GAIN and the background of some of the kids who went there. But we were convinced that, hey GAIN has changed. But now that Anthony is in there, we don't think it has changed.

The Conwells were convinced that Anthony's placement at GAIN was a last-ditch effort by Westridge Secondary School to eliminate a problem, rather than an educationally sound placement for Anthony. As noted above, they felt that

the school was simply "trying to push him out of the school." They felt, as did Anthony, that their son was quite different in motivation and lifestyle from the students in the alternative program: "He doesn't smoke, he doesn't drink, he doesn't have any, you know, drugs, no trouble with the law." On one occasion, Anthony said, "I don't know what I'm doing at GAIN. I have nothing in common with the kids up here, nothing."

Finally, though, there had been no choice. In a year-end interview with the principal at Westridge,

> He said, "Anthony is not coming back to this school next year." He said. And so we had no choice...If we had really fought for that, it would have put him in a worse position. I don't think they would have treated him too well.

The Conwells did not express any concern that Anthony would be influenced by the other students at GAIN, or that he would drop out of school, because "he's the kind of personality he will stick with what he's doing. Beyond that, his father said, "In our family, you know, you don't just quit school. You're there for the duration...He's very much aware. He knows that he's there and that he's got to stay there."

Anthony was not unaware of or unaffected by the effects on his family of his difficulties at school:

> The fact that he was rebelling at school, it was coming home. You could see his anger. So we were affected by it...Sometimes I think he felt guilty, because he seemed to be always in trouble, and I think he really felt guilty because I was going to the school over it. That he couldn't handle it, that was frustrating.

the Conwells' strongest criticism of the school system focussed on what they saw as the need to categorize students. Once that goal was achieved, they felt, the die was cast, and events began to move inexorably in a particular direction:

> They're not happy until they have a label, they once they <u>have</u> a label, the child is really in for it...They're treated in

> one certain way...Once they label a child, what chance does the child have?

They saw their son as an individual who simply could not be made to fit the system. To the Conwells, given their family system, that was not all bad:

> You know, it's a good example of a person who is creative, and then made to fit the norm. I have seen so many kids who have been stomped on, by their parents and by their teachers, because they're different. It leads to them dropping out of school, pure and simple.

Anthony's parents recognized, though, that for the most part, school people had done their best within a system that faced them with limited alternatives:

> There is a certain amount of flexibility in there, they do try to meet the needs of individual kids, but even with the amount of flexibility that there is, there needs to be even more.

The Conwells did not express discouragement about their son's school experience. Moreover, they were sympathetic with the people who worked in a context that in their view offered limited and in some cases inappropriate alternatives for students who did not fit the norm. Their approach to raising their children, they said, was one marked by whole-family discussions and group efforts to resolve problems. They felt there was little they could do, though, to influence the course of events at school. The answer, they said, was systemic rather than individual: "There are more kids like him out there. If only they had more alternatives,"

Peter Wilson: Glad to Take Him

> Their attitude was, "We are the system." You get the impression of people in robes and white wings who are going to give a final verdict. If there's anything that's frustrating...this is it.

Despite his analogy, Dennis Wilson certainly did not have a picture of school as heaven for his son Peter. Very early in his secondary school career, Peter was involved in an "incident" on his way home from school. His father and some other parents went to the school for a meeting about what had occurred, and were told that all of the students involved were being suspended for a week.

A month later, Peter was involved in another fight, this time with one other boy. Dennis went to the school for another meeting, where he was told that the parents of the other boy "were threatening police action."

By the late fall, the principal at K.B. Stanley Secondary School had seen much of Peter Wilson. On one occasion, he told the boy's father that the incident they were discussing was "just another in a series." The principal's assessment, according to Dennis, was that "Your kid is a hazard to the general student body's health."

Peter was referred to the school counsellor, who concluded that he should be transferred to an alternative program for students with behavior problems. The Summit Program, the counsellor said, offered a small group setting staffed by specially qualified teachers.

Peter's father was not convinced. He did not condone his son's behavior, but felt that it could be addressed within the regular school setting. Dennis met with the counsellor on several occasions in an effort to resolve his son's difficulties. He felt, though, that rather than searching for an explanation for Peter's behavior and trying to correct it, the school had one solution in mind: "They kept pushing Summit." Dennis said that he and

his wife "were left with the impression that they wanted to cleanse their school." At one point the counsellor's advice to Dennis Wilson was, "Don't make waves."

Later in the fall, Peter's father had a final meeting with the principal to tell him that he did not want to send his son to Summit. The response from the principal was clear. If Peter stayed at K.B. Stanley "and got into trouble, we would lose the school choice option - they would place him." After this, Dennis said, "The principal did not get involved. He closed his door and wouldn't have anything more to do with it. The vice-principal was running the school."

As the next step in his search for help and answers, Dennis made an appointment to see Harry Benson, who had been Peter's elementary school principal. Harry had been transferred, and he was now the principal of Alice Cameron Junior Secondary School. Dennis related to Harry the story of Peter's misadventures at K.B. Stanley. In Dennis' words, Harry "was totally shocked." He assured Dennis that "They would find room for him here. They'd be glad to take him."

Dennis was reluctant to move Peter if there was any chance that his problems at K.B. Stanley could be resolved, but he was glad of the option. Very soon after his meeting with Benson, though, the vice-principal at Stanley told Dennis that there would be "a severe penalty if anything out of the ordinary occurred." He said that because the Wilsons had turned down the placement at Summit, they had lost their options. Describing the interview, Dennis said that "it was a hostile situation, and a shock." He was left with the impression that the vice-principal's feeling was, "You're only a parent. Get lost."

Throughout this sequence of events, Peter had also been upset and confused, perhaps by his own behavior. His parents took him to the family's

doctor, who advised them to "take Peter out of school immediately, even if Summit was the only alternative."

Summit was not the only alternative, though. The Wilsons decided to move Peter to Alice Cameron School. Harry Benson had promised to "watch over him," and to the Wilsons and their son, the move seemed like a promising alternative. His father said that Peter's original placement at K.B. Stanley, which had been done on the basis of attendance zones, had removed him from "almost all of his friends he had been with since grade three." This move would reunite him with them.

Although, as Dennis Wilson acknowledged, Peter was "involved in some early incidents here," the adjustment was successful. By the time of the interview, Peter "had joined the band. He goes to school happy." His biggest complaint was that his social studies teacher was "too strict," but "his interim report was great."

One factor in Peter's successful adjustment, his father felt, was the fact that because of their regular contact with Harry Benson, "We are able to keep track. We always check with him about his day. He knew we would have an alternate source of information." When Dennis Wilson arrived at Alice Cameron School for his interview, he was greeted by Harry Benson, who introduced him to me with a reference to Peter: "He's really doing well here. He's one of our success stories."

Tim Ward: Let's Not Make Waves.

> His father didn't want to make waves. It was hard for Tim, because he thought, "Do I say yes to Mom or to Dad?...It was a really tough decision to move him. My husband and I didn't speak for a couple of days.

Margaret Ward felt out on a limb for much of the time during Tim's grade year. There were serious problems between her son and one of his teachers, but Ernie, her husband, thought that they should keep a low profile. Margaret was employed by the school board, the family needed her income, and Ernie thought that she would put herself at risk with her employer if, as he put it, she "raised a ruckus."

Tim's parents had disagreed previously but only minimally about their relationship with the school. In their son's grade eight year, though, the matter was complicated by an ongoing dispute over the situation in Tim's physical education class. Although physical education had been "his field" in elementary school, in grade eight "he wasn't doing well at all."

Fairly early in the school year Margaret, in particular, began to notice some disturbing changes in her son's behavior and self-image. During a mild disagreement over some aspect of Tim's behavior, he said, "I'm bad - go ahead and hit me." The only problems he related to his parents had to do with his physical education teacher. He said that he was constantly ridiculed by the man and sent up to the bleachers to sit out the class. While, he was in the bleachers, she said, the teacher would draw his classmates' attention to him and "tell the other kids that he was bad."

The problems and the situation became worse. His mother said, "At one point I went up to the school, but I didn't get much of a response. Well, I did get some response, but it was very negative."

The Wards had had no previous problem with their son's behavior in school. Margaret said that her son had "always had a reading problem," but

that he had been a very well-adjusted child. It was clear, though, that there was a major and growing problem. As the year progressed, his mother said, Tim stopped doing his homework and almost all of his out-of-school activities.

Over the next few months, Tim began to talk less about his school problems, although his parents knew from others that there had been no positive change. In one of what were quickly becoming rare comments about school, Tim said of his physical education teacher that "he couldn't do anything right for him." She said, "I think it became a challenge for this particular teacher to bring him down."

The situation was complicated by another factor. At the end of grade seven, the Wards had moved across town. Tim had just finished elementary school. In the minds of his parents, that was also a logical time for a school move. As his problems at the secondary school worsened, it became increasingly difficult for Tim to make new friends. His old friends were not calling as often any more, either, because they had embarked on new friendships. A large part of the reason for the family move was the fact that his mother had changed jobs. The move brought the Wards much closer to Margaret's new work site, but it also led to Tim saying on more than one occasion, "it's your fault that I don't have any friends." Margaret said during the interview, "I used to almost burst into tears."

The events of that fall were agonizing for the Wards. The situation was complicated by disagreement between Tim's parents about the action they should take. Margaret wanted to press harder for a solution, but Ernie did not agree. Margaret was distressed about the fact that the conflict between Tim and his physical education teacher seemed to be persisting: "Tim couldn't do anything right. He'd walk into the room and the fight would be on."

Margaret grew increasingly disturbed. Unable to understand why the situation had developed, and reluctant to heighten the tension at home by

acting unilaterally, she investigated every possibility that came to mind. Because of Tim's evident fear of his teacher, she wondered about sexual abuse, but eventually satisfied herself that the conflict was "pretty well all mental abuse, not any other." She said, "You know, it's really scary. I thought at one point, am I doing enough?"

Anxious to help and to stay close to her son, Margaret went with Tim to a school basketball game, where both were spectators. Tim's physical education teacher was there also, and Tim became visibly upset. Margaret also was distressed by what she saw. She said that the teacher, who was lower in the bleachers and had to turn in his seat to see them, "just stared at him for a long time. I know, because I saw it."

Shortly after this, at the end of Tim's second term in grade eight, father and son agreed to a change of school. It was not a pleasant situation, though. Ernie still was not supportive, and for a few days, things were tense at home. Mary recalled:

> I spent a lot of time in tears. I'd go to bed thinking about it, and I'd wake up thinking about it. My gut reaction was just that it had to be, and I hope I don't live to regret it.

In some respects, there was a noticeable improvement in Tim almost immediately after the school change. Margaret said, "There was a definite positive change within three weeks. Everybody noticed it." Tim resumed his participation in activities that he had once enjoyed but had dropped in his first few months of grade eight: "When he came here, he didn't want to try out for anything, but he made volleyball last year, and basketball this year."

Some problems lingered, though. Several weeks after the move, Tim's "sleeping patterns were still disturbed," and he "wasn't eating properly." Once, his mother said, "He panicked when he saw his old phys. ed. teacher on TV."

In some respects, the story of Tim is an unfinished story. During the interview, which took place a year and a half after Tim's move to his new secondary school, his mother still wondered aloud "if we should get professional help. That teacher has continued to loom large in Tim's mind."

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

As stated in Chapter One, the present study had two primary purposes: to establish baseline data in a relatively unexplored area, and to propose a preliminary model which might guide and be refined by further research. The study proceeded to gather data about parent-school conflict in a relatively linear manner, asking interview subjects (parents) to describe, with some prompting, the incident in which they had been involved. In the sense in which Tedeschi, Schlenker use the term, the investigation was carried out in the preparadigm stage of research in this specific area of the study of conflict. These authors note that "In that preparadigm stage...all facts seem equally relevant...early fact-gathering is an activity much more random than later theoretically guided research" (1973, p. 206). The only question in the interview schedule (Appendix C) which was based on an assumption about what might have happened during the life of the dispute was one which was asked, "Did you seek help from anyone outside the school or district?"

However, even after the data collection process started in a relatively "fact-gathering" mode, some regularities and patterns quickly became apparent. Some, like the absence of the child from the dispute-focused meetings, applied to almost all of the situations. Others, such as the feeling of some mothers that they had been the victims of unfair gender stereotyping, applied in only a few cases.

It is not possible to generalize on the basis of the results obtained from a sample of twelve cases in a preliminary exploratory study. However, on the basis of the selection procedure, some credibility can be attached to the reports obtained from the parents. The school principals were asked to identify only those situations in which, despite the fact that there had been

serious conflict in a previous school, there was no conflict in the new school. That selection criterion alone, given that few principals would want to risk a latent situation erupting as a result of the interview, ensured care in the selection process. In all cases, the parents interviewed were supportive of the teachers and principals at the child's present school.

Other aspects of the parents' responses during the interviews suggested that their stories carried some credibility. They all knew that the researcher was aware that there had been conflict, and may have assumed that he knew some of the details, although that was not the case. There was very little evident anger in the responses, although recalling certain events gave rise in one case to tears and in some others to a vigorous account of how a situation had been addressed at the time.

The children were also, at the time of the interview, in new schools. They and their parents had escaped the problem that had brought them to the interview; it was now history, although in some cases at least, painful history. The parents themselves seemed anxious to tell their stories. In some cases, one spouse corrected the other to ensure that events were kept in proper sequence. None was at all hesitant about allowing a stranger to tape record the interview, the privacy of which they were guaranteed only by the researcher's verbal promise. They knew that the researcher was familiar with the school system and may have known the school people involved in their stories.

It became clear during the interview that these accounts of conflict and dispute did not fit the pattern often discussed in the literature. There were always at least three individuals or groups involved. In each case, obviously, there was a student involved. In each case, there was at least one parent involved, and in most cases there were two. Where there was one

parent, that parent was usually the mother. The other party in each case was the group of individuals representing the school. Depending on how long the conflict situation had continued, one or more teachers were involved, usually one or more principals and, in some instances, school counsellors. In a few cases, the parent(s) went beyond the school for help. Typically, they went to the school district office and saw a senior official. In at least one instance, school district resource personnel had a part to play, and in that same case, the parents also sought help from a psychologist in private practice to assist in the diagnosis of their child's learning difficulties.

Each of these parties had a vested interest in the outcome of the dispute. All were in some way connected with the child, particularly the parents, the classroom teachers and the school principals. In the accounts given, none of these people played a typical third-party role of mediator or conciliator - they were all directly involved. That fact marks the most striking departure of these cases from the typical case of dispute.

To move toward a greater level of abstraction, these cases represented conflict involving a parent, a child and professional care-givers. This unusual situation meant that the individuals who were not part of the primary dispute found themselves both trying to address that problem and having to deal with a second level of dispute between themselves and the care-givers - the teachers and principals. In no case was there a disinterested third party skilled at resolving disputes, such as might be found in commercial arbitration or labour negotiations.

Several aspects of the findings are discussed in this chapter: **duration**, **the absent third party**, **stereotyping**, **five emotional components** and, at the end of each conflict situation, **a critical incident**.

Duration

The duration of several of the cases was surprising. Measured from the

first sign of conflict to the time of the school change, Chuck Farnsworth's problem on the bus was resolved the most quickly; probably within three weeks. Steven Bullen was out of the classroom and the school in just under a year, as was Peter Wilson. Those three cases, though, were the shortest in duration. The average length of time in dispute was approximately one and one-half years, excluding the case of Anthony Conwell.

Anthony, as his mother said, had been in difficulties in school since kindergarten. What made his case different, though, was his parents' deep commitment to a particular style of bringing up their children, and the fact that they encouraged their children to question and challenge. The Conwells recognized that their family lifestyle ran counter to some of the norms and expectations of the school system, and they seemed generally content to let things develop as they would, even for the nine or so years it had lasted by the time of the interview.

Given the intensity of feeling on the part of students and parents, it seems surprising that the disputes lasted as long as they did. Parent optimism may have been a factor in some instances, such as in the case of Steven Bullen. Steven's father, in the absence of hard evidence about what the problem might be, thought that his son was just going through some sort of "phase." Dianne Carter's mother thought that it "would sort of blow over, and she'd just learn to deal with it." A desire to show trust in the schools' professional staff, experiences of lack of success in addressing complaints, and a feeling that they wanted to show support for the teacher may all have been factors in the otherwise unexplainable fact that the disputes dragged on as they did. Perhaps even the format of the school year, with its three major breaks, may have encouraged some parents to move slowly in the hopes that the difficulties might disappear.

Probably a larger factor was the parent's longer time perspective and the fact that at some stage in the process, a few of them had become privately determined that the problem would be resolved one way or another. Dianne Carter's mother, for example, had no doubt about the eventual outcome. She said, "I knew that it would happen, I guess."

The Absent Third Party

A second striking finding was the fact that despite the fact that some of the children were in their teens and none were very young, very few of them were ever involved in any meetings or conversations that brought all parties together in an effort to resolve the dispute. Eric Bailey went with his parents to see the superintendent of schools, Lee Spencer had a meeting with the school counsellor, and Steven Bullen went with his father to the final meeting with the school principal. Other than that, no parent reported having had a meeting with school personnel at which their child was present.

No parent gave the impression that their child had taken advantage of being the absent third party. However, perhaps this anomaly may have lengthened the process in some instances. Perhaps some of these cases could have been resolved without a school change if all parties had come together to diagnose, discuss and plan.

Stereotyping

Reported stereotyping was of two kinds: a feeling of being disregarded because of being a parent, and gender stereotyping. In fact, it was difficult to separate the two, except in the case of Anthony Conwell, whose father complained that after a school change, it took a year to build credibility with the teachers in the new school. Kent Stanton's father referred to "smooth professional answers" given to parents of special needs students.

Two mothers expressed very strongly that they felt they had been disregarded because they were women. Chuck Farnsworth's mother felt that the

messages to her were that she was "just a woman" and "an overprotective mother". Lee Spencer's mother was cynical about the fact that her husband had been able to secure a school transfer almost immediately, and felt that the school listened more seriously when the words came from "a man's mouth." These sentiments were not widely expressed among the interviewees, but it was clear that the feelings were held deeply. The women concerned resented the fact that, in their perception, they were treated in an off-hand manner. One wondered aloud what she would have done to resolve the problem if she had been a single mother.

Emotional Components

The Child's Response

Several of the parents interviewed reported that their child had been upset with them at some time during the conflict episode, for one of two reasons: they felt either that their parents were not doing enough to help them, or that the parents were unfairly taking the school's side in the dispute.

Dianne Carter's mother was spurred into action when her daughter pointed out that her best friend had been given permission for a school transfer which Dianne had been refused. Lee Spencer's parents also began to feel the pressure when their son faced the same situation. Eric Bailey said to his frustrated parents at one point, "You're not doing anything."

In some instances, the children felt that even their parents were unfairly biased against them. Steven Bullen told his parents that he felt they had abandoned him, that they were unfairly taking the teacher's side in the dispute and were not supporting him. Fiona MacDonald, told by her mother to just go in and don't do anything out of line, responded in tears that she didn't do anything out of line. For their parts, the parents seemed only to

want to be fair to the school in the absence of clear facts. To the child who could see only the daily working out of the situation at school, that was not good enough.

Parents communicated vividly their perceptions of their childrens' feelings during the disputes. In almost every one of the twelve cases, parents reported in various ways the depth of their child's feelings during the episode:

> "There were almost kind of subtle things that you don't notice at the time."
>
> "He was just devastated."
>
> "He was so negative - he didn't feel good about himself."
>
> "He would be sleepwalking, he would be talking in his sleep...The day he left that school, the nightmares stopped."
>
> "He was an emotional wreck the last two months."
>
> "It was a miserable experience for her."

It was clear that much emotional energy had been expended during the disputes. A common theme running through several of the interviews was the parents' difficulty in dealing with the schools over the issue, partly through not knowing how to deal with the system, and partly because of their desire to be fair. Their feelings about the matter may have been summarized best by Steven Bullen's mother:

> We kind of supported the teacher, because you don't want to always take the child's side, because then they'll run over the teacher, sort of, but we didn't really understand what was going on.

Fear for the Child's Wellbeing

Parents communicated in various ways their concerns for their child's immediate welfare and for his/her future emotional and educational welfare. Mary Farnsworth stated emphatically that the bus driver's personal concerns ought not to be communicated to her son: "kids have enough to think about in

their lives." Eric Bailey's mother expressed her concern about "the change in his personality." Jimmy Hill's mother, reflecting on her frustration at not knowing what a learning disability was, said, "It's hard, it's really hard, because you're dealing with someone's future." Lee Spencer's parents were concerned that "He was going nowhere in that school...it was not only going to ruin his schooling, it was probably going to make serious dents in his post-secondary education, and possibly the rest of his life."

Again, in one way or another, many of these parents expressed concern about their child's emotional and/or educational health. It was to be a concern that surfaced again as they described the emotional intensity of the conflict period.

Emotional Intensity

The most graphic display of feelings occurred when parents described how they felt personally during the period of the dispute. Thinking about the family disagreement that had erupted over the decision, finally, to move Tim to another school, his mother said, "I spent a lot of time in tears. I'd go to bed thinking about it, and I'd wake up thinking about it." Expressing her frustration, Eric Bailey's mother recalled that "it was like a year of letting your kid down, because you couldn't correct the situation, that was the hardest part." Dallas Waterman's mother suggested that her experience was not unusual: "I think...most parents go through a lot of inner turmoil,thinking, "Is it my child?" This is what was our turmoil."

Typically in these interviews, it was the mother who expressed her personal stresses most readily. In each case, the expression was one of concern for the child in a situation that seemed beyond his/her ability to cope, and perhaps also beyond the parents' capability. They used such phrases as "very hectic," "fed up," very frustrated," and "maze of frustration" to describe their feelings and the impact on family life. Much of this

frustration was directed at what they saw as a lack of responsiveness on the part of the school personnel with whom they had dealt.

Perceived Attitudes of School Personnel

In examining this aspect of the data, it is important to note that the present study is to a large extent a study of reported perceptions. Parents stated what they thought was the stance taken by school personnel. We did not have access to data supplied by school personnel regarding such aspects as their efforts to resolve the issues, the obstacles they faced within the system, or the challenge of dealing with the family concerned. Nevertheless, it is important to identify the views expressed by these parents from their perspective as advocates for their child.

Parents made three types of comments about the responses of school personnel. Some, such as the Conwells, also acknowledged the difficulty of the task of teachers, in particular: "they've got a tough job, so you can't fault them." Where parents reported a perception that the school was not responding positively to their concerns, they spoke of perceived inaction, a perceived desire to remove the child from the school, and a perception of dislike for the child. The first two comments described parents' perceptions of school administrators; the third focused on teachers.

Chuck Farnsworth's mother felt that the principal could easily have resolved the problem on the bus, yet it was Mrs. Farnsworth herself who eventually demanded a meeting of all parties: "The principal that was here could have resolved it...and he wouldn't do it, you know." Both parents who tried, unsuccessfully at first, to arrange a school transfer for their child expressed frustration with the response. Dianne Carter's principal, according to Dianne's mother was retiring at the end of the year, and "gave the impression that he didn't really care, he wasn't going to be there." When Lee

Spencer suggested that his parents weren't doing enough to get him transferred, they sent him to see the counsellor himself to see whether he could accomplish what they could not. Jimmy Hill's mother encountered a different type of problem, as did the Stantons. In both cases, they reported that they had been unable to get a clarifying response which would shed light on their child's learning difficulties. Several times, Becky Hill said, she had asked, "What's a learning disability?"

In at least two cases, parents thought that the school's primary aim was to remove the child from the school. Both were boys in secondary schools whose principals were urging that the boys be placed in an alternative program. The Conwells, who recognized that their son presented a significant management problem for the school, eventually agreed to accept what they still thought was an inappropriate placement for Anthony. They felt, though, that "they were trying to push him out of the school." Peter Wilson said, 'We were left with the impression that they were trying to cleanse their school."

Five parents stated in various ways that they thought the problem either arose from or was worsened because the teacher did not like their child and was treating him or her unfairly. Eric Bailey's parents reported that they were puzzled by the fact that their son was "being picked on constantly," because their view of Eric was that he was a child who would respond to the directive, "Jump," with "How high?" They also indicated that Eric's friends shared their puzzlement. Dallas Waterman's father stated that Dallas' teacher would "call him stupid...make derogatory remarks...constantly be belligerent to him." The Bullens, who had indicated that they were anxious to support the school, concluded after a conversation with the teacher that "Basically, he said he gave up on him, which really surprised me - it ticked me off." Both Fiona MacDonald and her mother, according to Mrs. MacDonald, felt that Fiona was being ridiculed by the French teacher because of her Scottish accent. Tim

Ward's mother related an account of her son being sent by the teacher to sit in the bleachers where, she said, Tim was pointed out to other students as "bad."

Except in the cases of transfer request, these impressions reported by the parents were inferences drawn which probably could not have been discussed openly with any chance of acceptance or corrective action. Few school administrators would admit to a desire simply to remove a child from the school, and few teachers would admit to a parent a dislike for that parent's child. In fact, the perceptions may not in all cases have been accurate. However, they were reported as perceptions, which suggests that they are factors to be considered in dispute resolution efforts.

Parental Resolve

In all of the cases in the present study, the child had been moved from the school in which the conflict situation had arisen. It would be difficult, therefore, to draw conclusions about these parents' determination to see the situation resolved. Almost all expressed that determination, though, either directly or by describing what they had done. All of these parents, though, worked through the process of teacher first, if it was a classroom issue, then the school administrator, then if necessary, school district administrator. Eric Bailey's parents took the matter the farthest within the system, going to "first the principal, then the vice-principal, and then the superintendent...the chairman of the board of education was the final resort."

The only parent who removed the child from the public school system was Jimmy Hill's mother, and she eventually returned her son to public school. In two cases, Fiona MacDonald and Peter Wilson, the parents went directly to the principal of another school to arrange a transfer. In both cases, they reported a positive response. For Fiona MacDonald's mother, although it meant

a transfer out of French immersion, it came as a sudden realization that she could take the initiative: "It was like seeing the light...And it was all done in two days." When Peter Wilson's father went to the second school, the response was that "They would find room for him here. They'd be glad to take him."

Vivid Recall

The final observation on the findings of the study is that all of the parents appeared to have a vivid recall of the events in the situation under discussion. Even where the conflict situation had lasted for several years, parents remembered the sequence of events.

To check this perception, the researcher read back to the interviewees the chronology of events as it had been presented. The parents confirmed the correctness of the chronology. In a few instances, one spouse reminded the other of an event which had been missed, and it was then described. In a few instances, one parent would correct the other about the sequence of events, sometimes using other family events to help place an incident in its proper location in time. The majority of parents recalled the events in quite chronological order. The Baileys, in particular, recalled every incident and occurrence, because they had kept a journal of the situation as it had developed.

The overall impression was that the matters these parents described were important life events. They could remember the chronology, they could remember their conversations with school personnel, and most acutely, they could remember their own and their childrens' feelings during the life of the conflict situation.

The patterns noted in the data suggest that there may be identifiable patterns in situations of conflict between parents and schools. Certainly the degree of consistency even within this small group of people with one thing in

common - the transfer of their child because of an unresolved dispute - suggests that these patterns and consistencies may exist within a much larger sample.

Critical Incident

It was not always possible to identify the precise point at which the conflict between these parents and children and the school began, particularly if the early incidents arose as a result of the child's learning difficulties. It would be more accurate, perhaps, to say that a pattern began to emerge. The path from that early beginning varied from case to case. In some cases, to continue the analogy, the path went from rough to smooth and from wide to narrow at various times during the life of the dispute.

In two cases, it was possible to identify precisely the incident which began the conflict: the cases of Chuck Farnsworth and Dianne Carter. Mrs. Farnsworth was concerned about the school bus driver's driving habits and his threat to put her child off the bus in a wooded area seven miles from his home. For Dianne Carter's mother, the seeds of dispute were planted at the time of the first refusal to let Dianne attend the school of her choice.

As unclear as it was in some cases what the trigger, or initiating incident was, almost every case was marked by a **critical incident** which resulted in action by the parents. These critical incidents are shown in Table 1, which also indicates the action taken.

Table 1 Critical Incidents and Subsequent Actions

Case	Critical incident	Subsequent action
Chuck Farnsworth	Bus driver telling marital problems	Mother demanded meeting of all parties
Dianne Carter	New school not authorized over summer	Mother went to principal of new school
Eric Bailey	Eric left behind from going to museum	Eric removed from school late spring
Lee Spencer	Mother annoyed with Lee's persistence	Father demanded and got school change
Dallas Waterman	Teacher's allegation Dallas had cheated	Father removed Dallas, called Asst Supt
Jimmy Hill	Hills received private school brochure	Hills sent Jimmy to private school
Kent Stanton	Major confrontation - Kent and teacher	District placement meeting, new school
Steven Buller	Year-end report received	Other principal approved transfer
Fiona MacDonald	Mother realized transfer was possible	Transfer arranged by mother
Anthony Conwell	Principal insisted on special placement	Parents accepted placement
Peter Wilson	School insisted on alternate placement	Other principal approved move request
Tim Ward	Anxiety re: p.e. teacher was too much	Other principal approved move request

Unfortunately, identifying the critical incident is simply post hoc recognition. At this point, the decision has been made. The parents have identified alternatives, chosen a solution, and implemented their planned action. That is not to say that their decision is irreversible. The question is whether a system or an individual which has been either unable or unwilling to effect a solution throughout the life of the conflict situation is likely

to do so at this late point in the dispute. Even if a reasonable solution were offered, the damage done to existing relationships between parents and school, and the situation as seen through the child's eyes, may make an in-school solution unlikely, if not impossible.

Summary

There were several quite noticeable findings: the extended duration of most of the conflict situations; the absence of the child from meetings and discussions between parents and school staff in almost all cases; stereotyping in a few cases, and the existence of a critical incident. The most striking aspect of the findings, though, related to the emotional aspects of each case. The section above has provided detail on each of these regularities, with the caution that the findings have come at the preparadigm stage of research into the matter of parent-school conflict.

The findings do, however, raise some interesting possibilities for further inquiry into the topic. If the patterns are similar for a larger sample, there are many implications for the nature and quality of relationships between parents, children and their schools. The findings have raised some important questions and presented some possibilities which will be discussed in the final chapter of this report.

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This investigation into the phenomenon of parent-school conflict was exploratory in nature. Although the general topic of human conflict provides a broad base of literature, this specific focus has been largely unexplored. It differs from some of the other subsets of inquiry into conflict and disputes because of the involvement of a third party who is always part of and affected by the conflict, but who is almost never present for attempts at conflict resolution. Almost without exception, the child's parents act as advocate and go-between, but the child is not present.

Research Design and Methodology

Because of the lack of previous data in a somewhat unique conflict situation, the research design was naturalistic in approach, ethnographic in methodology and exploratory in nature. The primary question facing researchers engaging in such research is whether the results are valid and reliable. That question faces all researchers, but it "poses a herculean problem for researchers concerned with naturalistic behavior or unique phenomena" (Goetz and LeCompte, 1984, p. 211). While it is impossible to replicate exactly, research into specific incidents of human behavior, the relative consistency of the findings within this small group of subjects suggests that further research may encounter similar patterns. It also suggests that the subject is worthy of further inquiry.

The matter of research design and methodology is addressed first in this chapter, because the validity and usefulness of the recommendations which follow will rest to a large extent on what the reader makes of the work which has been done. The educator who categorizes the account as a rather one-sided account of a multifaceted problem, for example, will not accept the validity

of observations and recommendations made on the basis of a study of the perceptions of just one of the groups involved.

What sets this study apart from some others are the process and the set of criteria used to select subjects (Appendix B). School principals in "no present conflict" situations screened and offered potential subjects. This fact alone suggested that the individuals selected would have met some preliminary tests of personal credibility in the mind of the principal, at least.

The face validity of the parents' reports (generally, they "made sense"), the relative consistency of the findings across the group, and the sampling procedure suggest that the findings, at least for the purpose of planning further research, are trustworthy. The area itself, given the enormous potential number of parent-school conflict situations, promises to be a fruitful area for further research.

RECOMMENDATION 1
That further research into the phenomenon of parent-school conflict be carried out with a larger sample of subjects and cases, with a broader base of data collection strategies (perhaps including survey questionnaires), with the intent of testing the model which appears later in this chapter.

RECOMMENDATION 2
That such research seek to determine whether and in what ways this type of three-way conflict situation is different from other dispute settings

The Absent Third Party

It is understandable that most parents would not want to involve their child in adult-to-adult conversations which might become heated. The same would probably be true for most teachers who thought that their students might attend such meetings. However, many of these disputes continued unresolved for months, if not years, with no solution except the eventual move of the child to another school. It seems almost certain that all parties involved

felt a certain degree of stress and anguish about the situation.

One possible reason for the fact that not all parties involved in the dispute were present for meetings to discuss it was that the participants were operating primarily from a positional stance. Positions, once taken, often become places to stand. When that is the case, participants often feel that there are only two possible alternatives: win or lose. If so, neither party is likely to want to enlarge the participant group. However, discussions involving the child, provided they are well planned and carefully managed, may yield constructive possibilities for resolution of the dispute.

There was no evidence in any of the cases that any of the parties were skilled in dispute resolution, or even that they recognized the difficulty of positional bargaining. There is a significant need for parents, teachers and students to understand the essential concepts, strategies and skills of alternative dispute resolution.

RECOMMENDATION 3
That school districts and schools investigate the need for alternative dispute resolution skills within their organizations, with particular emphasis on designing programs to address the problem of parent-school conflict.

The Emotional Component

Regardless of the accuracy as to detail of parents' reports, it was obvious in both their accounts and their manner of presentation that conflict involving themselves, their child and school personnel was highly stressful. Parents expressed concern about their child's wellbeing and shared their own feelings of distress as situations unfolded which they felt powerless to affect.

Almost any measures to eliminate some of this stress would be well received by those involved in the situations described in this study and other similar situations. Three suggestions come to mind: communication, recognition, and early strategic intervention.

Communication between people is often difficult to maintain. The problem becomes more acute when parents are at work and teachers are busy with a multitude of problems and day-to-day matters. Yet many of the disputes in the present might have been resolved without a school move if there had been active, regular and listening communication between parents and teachers or administrators.

Skilled trainers in communication might help teachers to recognize emerging conflict situations and resolve issues before they become full-blown disputes. Several parents from the present study would have been much more prepared to become solution-focused if they had been communicating with a teacher who recognized the developing situation.

Finally, problems require plans to resolve them. In the case of conflict involving children, early action is essential if escalation is to be avoided. What seemed to be missing from the cases presented here was any evidence that the school, the parents and the student had developed and agreed on a plan to address their problems.

RECOMMENDATION 4
That teachers and their representatives with responsibility for staff development consider attaching priority to programs which will assist teachers to identify and diagnose a variety of student-related problems and to design concrete, shared-responsibility plans for resolving those problems which can be recognized and endorsed by parents.

RECOMMENDATION 5
That schools investigate ways of developing the attitudes, knowledge and skill of both parents and teachers together and in the same training activities, with a view to opening communication and ensuring shared understandings of processes designed to reduce the incidence of unresolved disputes.

It is generally accepted that the time to build employee relations is not at the bargaining table but on the job as part of the normal ebb and flow of working life. That may also be true of the process of building healthy relationships among teachers, parents and students. By the time the critical

incident occurred in these cases, the direction was decided, or to continue the labor analogy, the strike was on. Consideration of and action on some of the above recommendations may assist in building those relationships. It may also address some other problems raised by the study, particularly the issue of stereotyping.

A Framework for Further Study

The area of parent-school conflict lacks helpful models which are specifically relevant to this particular manifestation of conflict. It is important that any representation of this pattern of conflict recognize the fact that there are at least three involved parties. The model presented below (Figure 3) may provide an early starting point in the effort to understand this phenomenon.

The model identifies a point of **conflict initiation**, which may be either a single event, such as the first refusal of Valley Secondary School to allow Dianne Carter to attend there, or a series of events or actions, such as the behavior of Chuck Farnsworth's bus driver. The broken line in the model indicates that the point at which the conflict begins, or more precisely, the point at which it becomes a manifest conflict or a dispute, is not always clearly marked.

The **path of conflict** may be short in duration, such as in the case of Chuck Farnsworth, or much longer as was the case with Anthony Conwell. Progress toward either resolution or a critical incident may be marked by periods of relative quiet. It may also be best described as a series of unresolved issues and incidents which cause the dispute to escalate toward a critical incident.

It is important to recognize that parent-school conflict will always be bounded by the nature of the **parent-student-school staff relationship**. As

noted earlier in this report, parent-school conflict is most frequently characterized by sets of two-way communication patterns: parent-student, parent-staff and staff-student. Seldom in this study was the student present for a discussion of possible solutions to the dispute. The model assumes that, in some cases at least, this pattern will be changed to ensure that all involved parties develop different communication patterns which might increase the chances of success in the dispute resolution effort.

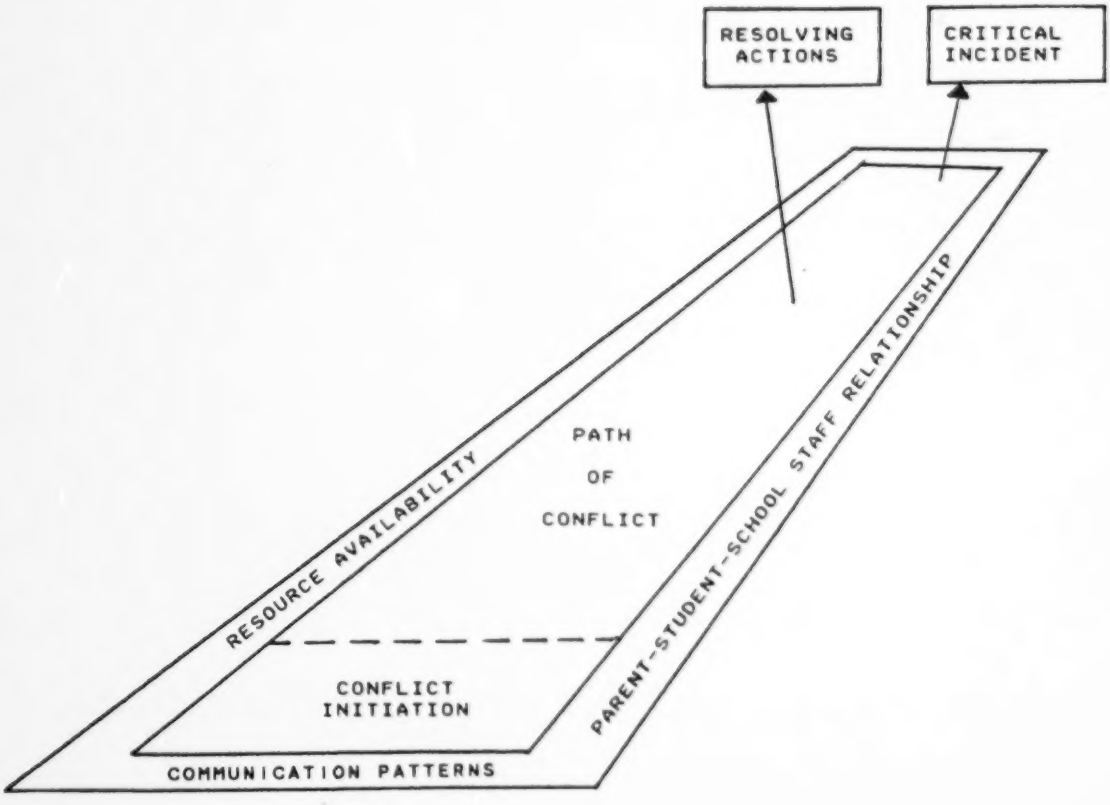

Figure 1. The path of parent-school conflict.

The other major variable which has the capacity to affect the eventual outcome of the dispute is **resource availability**. This comment is somewhat speculative at this point, because the present study did not include data collection from school staff members. However, several of the students were in need of special educational services. It may have been that the school did not have available the range of options which would have included appropriate placements for students such as Anthony Conwell and Jimmy Hill. If the school has no appropriate alternative placement or support service available, the chances are increased that it will be difficult or impossible to resolve the dispute.

Although many of the disputes in the present study continued over periods ranging from several months to several years, each had a final outcome. In the case of all except Anthony Conwell, the final event was a **critical incident**. Some parents described it as "the straw that broke the camel's back," or "the last straw." It occurred for Eric Bailey's parents when Eric was left behind at the school and could not find his class. For George and Elaine Waterman, it was the time Dallas was accused of cheating on a test. The cases in the present study had in common, except for the case of Chuck Farnsworth, was the fact that the critical incident was followed by a change of school.

Chuck Farnsworth's case was the only one in which the conflict situation was concluded within the school by a **resolving action**, a meeting of all parties and a subsequent agreement between Chuck and the bus driver. The recommendations earlier in this chapter address this major problem with the manner in which the other disputes proceeded - without strategies to resolve conflict. Even in Chuck's case, he was not present for the meeting of all the adults involved, but rather was advised of the outcome. It will not always be

appropriate to have the student present at adult-adult meetings, but it is likely that in many cases, that practice would be helpful.

The model provides a way of looking at parent-school disputes which may be useful in setting parameters for further research into the topic. It may also be helpful in designing professional development and parent training activities, by providing a framework for thinking about parent-school disputes and the processes of resolving them.

Conclusion

The issue of parent-school conflict is clouded by its unique nature. It is two-way conflict about the interests not only of the two present parties but also of an absent party; one who, according to several of the accounts given, runs some risk of long-term harm. It is also a phenomenon which has the potential to affect any of the individuals who are involved in the business of schooling. For these reasons alone, it is important that we seek to understand the issues and to address them with a higher level of skill than we have been able to bring to bear in the past. Perhaps that effort will help us, both teachers and parents, to avoid having to say, as Rosemary Stanton said,

> Neither of us were about to let go of what we knew to be true, and they weren't about to see what we were seeing, and they weren't about to see the importance of what we were saying...very many times we felt like we were stranded, you know, us against them.

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APPENDICES

September 26, 1989

Re: Parent-School Conflict Study, University Approval 103-89

Dear

Enclosed is a brief outline of this project. I appreciated the opportunity to discuss it with you recently. The study will add important new information in an area that has not yet been adequately explored - conflicts which occur between schools and parents. The findings should establish baseline information for further study and for the development of inservice training materials.

The research is being carried out as a project of the UVic Institute for Dispute Resolution. The projected completion date is April 30, 1990.

I have a three-part request for your assistance:

1. Approval to carry out the study in your district.

2. Either:

   a. Identification, by you and/or district staff, of principals with students whose parents have moved them there because of an unresolved dispute with another school. Their relationship with the present school should be one which is free of conflict. Once those principals have agreed to a preliminary meeting with me, I would receive their names from you.

   or:

   b. An opportunity to meet with principals to explain the research and ask for their participation. Perhaps this could take place at one of your regular meetings with them.

I will ask participating principals to make the initial contact with parents. Only after parents have tentatively agreed to participate will I contact them. The purpose of this and of the criterion in 2a. above is to ensure that the research process will not reactivate old unresolved disputes. I will collect data by interviewing parents.

Once the interview data have been analyzed, I will develop a questionnaire for circulation to all principals and a sample of teachers in the district to explore the topic further.

May I have your permission to carry out the research in your district? If you approve, I would appreciate it if you would complete the form below and return one copy of this letter. When I receive your reply, I will contact you to arrange the next steps.

Yours truly,

Vernon J. Storey,
Associate Professor

VJS/sdr

Permission is hereby granted to Dr. Vernon Storey to carry out the research project Parent-School Conflict (approval No. 103-89) described in this letter and the accompanying outline.

School District No. _____ (_____)

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Position: _____

UVic Institute for Conflict Resolution
Research Project - Parent-School Conflict

GUIDELINES FOR SELECTION OF SUBJECTS

Characteristics of the Situation

1. There is presently no home-school dispute, at least as far as personnel at this school are aware.

2. The principal is aware of a conflict situation involving these parents and another school.

3. That previous situation was a major factor in the parents' decision/request to place their son/daughter in the present school (or perhaps a family move occurred fortuitously during the dispute, resulting in the child moving to the present school.)

Parameters for the Interview

4. Families are identified and interview arrangements made by the present principal.

5. Both principal and parents are aware that the interviews are confidential, and that there will not be a follow-up interview with school personnel.

6. Parents and principal are willing to have the interview held at the school.

7. The researcher does not need to know the identity of school personnel who were involved in the situation being examined. If names are mentioned inadvertently, they will be held in strict confidence.

8. To date in the study, interviews have averaged 45 minutes.

Parent-School Conflict

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE - PARENTS (DRAFT)

1. Can you describe for me the nature of the conflict which took place between you and the school?

1.1 What was the sequence of events which led up to this situation?

1.2 Were these all of the parties involved, or were there others? (List parties named by subject)

1.3 Over what period of time did these events take place? (Give researcher's estimate from conversation to this point)

2. Can you describe for me the meetings, correspondence, etc. between you and the other(s) involved? (See if copies of correspondence can be obtained)

2.1 How did you feel about these meetings? letters?

3. What would have resolved the problem to your satisfaction?

4. Why was the problem not resolved?

4.1 What solutions did school personnel offer?

4.2 Why were these solutions not suitable or not acceptable to you?

5. What did you do to try and reach a solution?

5.1 Did you seek help from anyone outside the school or district?

6. (only where conflict has been resolved) How was this conflict finally resolved?

6.1 What made that solution acceptable to you?

NB - Items 7 and 8 were added after the first two interviews.

7. As you think back over this incident, if you were to paint a picture of it, or finish this sentence, "It was like...," what would you paint, or what would you say?

8. As I was listening to your account, I noted what I would call some incidents that seemed to intensify the conflict. (review the incidents in chronological order. Am I correct?